

# Events of a Different Nature

---

by

**Tom Merritt**



## Copyright

---

Events of a Different Nature

by Tom Merritt

Creative Commons © 2014 Tom Merritt

Printed in the United States of America

This book is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 License.

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>

NOTES:

This story was written as part of the National Novel Writing Month movement, November 2011.

ISBN: 978-1-312-46344-8



# **Dedication**

---

**To all the dogs**





## **Acknowledgements:**

---

Thanks to NaNoWriMo for the motivation to get yet another story on paper, or at least in Google Docs.

Thanks to C.J. Harrison for another exquisite editing experience. As always you made this so much better.

Thanks to Boomer for listening to CJ edit and providing in valuable loyalty and support.

Thanks to Jango and Sawyer for inspiring this story. Any resemblance between this and the actual events of their lives is astounding to me.

Immense thanks to Len Peralta for the fantastic cover art! You should buy more of Len's stuff people.

Thanks to my wife, Eileen for making us bring dogs into our lives and helping us find the best dogs ever.





## 1 – San Rafael

The Grey Man sped toward a wall and Sawyer cut the rascal off. Jango ran up to block the other direction. Anticipation thrilled through her. It looked like this time they would catch the miscreant. They were close to finally solving their longest-running case together, working like a machine.

The Grey Man was on a narrow pathway along the edge of a pond. Sawyer ran behind him, driving him straight at Jango. The Grey Man had nowhere to go. On his right was the pond, on his left, a high wall. They had him.

As he got close, Jango opened her mouth to speak, but before she could get much out, the Grey Man disappeared. Where could he have gone? Sawyer stopped and wheeled around to face the wall. Somehow the Grey Man had leaped up and was scrambling over it. Sawyer jumped and almost reached the Grey Man's ankle. Jango recovered from the surprise and ran over to help. Just before they could grab him, he pulled his leg out of reach and disappeared.

Jango and Sawyer stood panting, looking from each other to the wall and back. Eventually they caught their breath and walked silently past the pond toward their office. Even though he had eluded them this time, they had gotten closer than ever. The private investigative team of Jango and Sawyer worked well together, she thought.

It hadn't always been that way.

## 2 – Oakland

Long before she started her own firm, Jango Champelli worked for a secret organization called, simply, The Agency. Her job meant late nights and long absences. It was a strain to keep up the appearances of her cover job working for the park system and still maintain her home, even with the help of good friends to water the plants and bring in the mail when necessary. So she decided to take on a roommate. That's when she met Sawyer Jarule.

Jango's friend Eileen had been in touch with a job placement organization and thought Jango and Sawyer might make a good match. Jango agreed to have Sawyer stay with her on a trial basis just to see how it went.

At first he was charming. Everyone loved his winning smile. She quickly agreed to make the arrangement permanent.

Jango liked having him around because he had something she didn't. She even envied him a little. When she walked down the street, she occasionally received cold, but appreciative glances—the way people might look at an impressive piece of dangerous machinery—but more often than not, people crossed the street. Something about her naturally warned people not to mess with her. It served her well in her work, but she often felt misunderstood in everyday life. In her work she needed to face down bad guys and gain instant respect. She was a secret agent in a dangerous world. In real life she just wanted someone to value her. She had a hard time finding people who would get close enough to do that.

Not Sawyer.

Everyone stopped to say hello to that charming boy. He charmed Jango too. When she was with Sawyer people would stop and say hello and compliment them. Sawyer knew how to talk to people and put them at ease. It was a skill she would later learn he picked up out of necessity while surviving on the streets. But it never came off as forced or threatening. People always left a meeting with Sawyer with a smile.

That's why she agreed to let him move in. And it was all good at first, but as Sawyer became more comfortable, his mercenary street personality showed through more—as did his ignorance of how to exist in a civilized and stable situation. Where Jango had come up through Agency training, Sawyer had been homeless. He had scraped by on anything he could scrounge with his own wit. He learned to be wary and

he learned to defend himself. His charm was a front that hid a dark and stormy soul once you got to know him.

Sawyer wanted someone to value him as much as Jango wanted someone to value her. But he would lash out at unpredictable times and do inconsiderate things without apology. She still shook her head at how he had used her office as a bathroom because it was closer and he didn't think she used it for anything important. It was funny. Now. But not then. Several times in that first year, she came close to kicking him out. Thank goodness she hadn't. He had become invaluable. Now she couldn't imagine life without him.

Those particular troubles were all in the past. She had retired from the Agency and they moved north of Oakland to San Rafael. Jango set up shop with her own private agency called Jango Investigations—a dream she'd had for years. Sawyer worked a cover job as a project manager in Petaluma and was her silent partner.

One of their longest running cases was also their first, the weird Grey Man who crept around the nearby pond. At first it seemed like an easy one—meet up with the guy, ask him his business, find out what his intentions were. It shouldn't have been an issue. It was. They'd been after him for more than a year now. Every time they got close, he caught on to them and ran. They needed stealth.

Jango was no good at stealth anymore. Truth be told, she'd never been great at it. In her younger days with the Agency she could sneak up on someone undetected if her life was on the line. Not anymore. She had a bum knee and a grumpy demeanor and she just didn't have the patience for sneaking.

Sawyer wasn't any more patient than Jango, but he was quick. One time, through sheer speed, he almost managed to pounce on the guy alone. That's when they came up with their current plan of attack. When they had a good idea where the Grey Man was, Sawyer would slip up alone and scare him into running toward Jango. It had almost worked this time. Almost.

### 3 – San Rafael

Jango Investigations was housed in a modest place with lots of light, a fireplace, a couch, a few chairs and a table. From the beginning, Jango decided to forgo the traditional desk and chair office design, preferring a more casual approach to put clients at ease. She usually sat on the couch, while Sawyer had a workspace closer to the fireplace.

Still tired from the chase, they plopped down and discussed what just happened with the mysterious Grey Man. Jango wanted to develop a new strategy but Sawyer insisted they needed to stick with the plan.

Jango sighed. Sawyer's stubbornness was an asset now but in the past had caused incredible trouble. She remembered when they lived in Oakland and Sawyer went through a period of petty theft. It was typical roommate drama, but Sawyer took it too far. He claimed he owned Jango's things and wouldn't let her use them. One time he took a favorite knickknack of hers. Another time he stole stuffed animal. He even ate her food. It led to several rather intense fights. Eventually he lightened up and learned—not, necessarily, to share, but at least not to care if Jango used her own stuff.

He also went through a period of picking fights with strangers. Then, for a while, he went around relieving himself in inappropriate places. Jango sometimes wondered why she put up with him at all. It wasn't because of his charm. It certainly wasn't romance—Sawyer was like a brother to her. It was his utter and total lack of sense that he was doing anything wrong. No one ever taught him how to act normal. Once he learned something he was doing was wrong, he was always horrified with himself. That redeeming fact and his touching hard luck story are what kept Jango from tossing him out.

Sawyer grew up homeless in the valley town of Merced. He didn't have much in the way of family and soon found himself alone with nowhere to turn. He used his charm to cadge a meal here and there, but he barely scraped by. He was just skin and bones.

He fell in with a bad crowd and did some things he wasn't proud of. He landed behind bars more than a few times, the last time in an Oakland jail. That time, someone from a county work program came to interview him, and he agreed to try to straighten his life out. He was placed in a job and given a place to live. Into Jango's life he came.

Jango agreed to take a chance on a ne'er-do-well with a record because she had experienced some hard times as well—and because the placement group exaggerated Sawyer's good behavior.

Jango grew up in San Francisco, in a good but strict household. Right before she took her first job, her parents moved away and abruptly cut her off from the family. She never knew what caused the falling out, but there she was, hurt, angry and left on her own in the big city with a job on the horizon but no other prospects. Her anger got her into trouble. She took to fighting and eventually worse. She got charged with aggressive behavior and faced hard time with no chance for parole. That's when the Agency contacted her and offered her a job. They got her released and wiped her record.

Eventually she found a place to live in San Francisco's Sunset District and started training with an ex-military sergeant south of town. To keep her cover, she took a job. It was a nightmare. Her boss was nice enough but totally negligent. He locked her out of the bathroom once and she almost had an accident in the office. He sometimes didn't even show up, leaving her with all the work. This didn't help her anger issues, and more than once she destroyed things in frustration, including an irreplaceable Christmas ornament.

She quit that cover job and took up with a much better firm and things seemed to stabilize. Meanwhile her Agency training was tough and brought her to tears sometimes. But it all paid off the day of her final exam when she passed with flying colors.

Then it was out of the classroom into real work. She was assigned to a staff that operated out of Oakland, so she moved across the bay and began her cover gig in the park system. She ostensibly left for work in the park every day while often sneaking off to Cairo or Belize on her agency assignments.

In the midst of it all she saw Sawyer as another lost soul who just needed a chance. She felt pretty sure that's why she stuck it out with him. She even encouraged him to train as an agent. Her instructor had sadly passed on, but she found a paramilitary group to take Sawyer on.

This gave him some focus and his life improved immeasurably. It would take time before he became the mature partner that he eventually became, but Jango felt a glow of satisfaction that her bet had paid off. She had feared at some moments that it wouldn't.

Back in the office Jango and Sawyer were discussing what to do about the Grey Man. They decided they were spinning their wheels with him and should move on to another case. The Grey Man might be their white whale but he wasn't the most urgent case they had. It looked like a gang had returned to their neighborhood and they'd have to do some work that weekend to clear them out.

The gang, called the Coyotes, had been causing trouble in the neighborhood since well before Jango and Sawyer set up shop. Sawyer's experiences in Merced came in handy in helping understand the gangsters. They weren't a murderous gang, but they didn't back down easily.

Jango did most of the recon work while out for walks with her friend Eileen. Long walks were about the most exercise Jango could handle. Her knees were bad from years of extreme activity. Her long walks gave her more pleasure in the end, anyway. Walking and talking with a friend who had no idea about Jango's secret past was a soothing relief. When they first took on the Coyotes case, Jango went with Eileen up into the hills surrounding the neighborhood, presumably for a long walk. Any suspicious gang member would not have suspected Jango of snooping, even though that's exactly what she was doing.

She pretended to be interested in various plant life along the walk. She was really using her steel-trap memory to find and document the clues she needed to track down the gang.

Later that evening she turned over everything she had learned to Sawyer who headed out in the middle of the night when the Coyotes loved to operate. They made such noise it wasn't hard to find them. He sneaked around without the Coyotes realizing he was there. Using Jango's information and his own observations, he learned where their stash was, where they kept their things and a few secrets about how they operated. He eventually got a message to them demanding a meeting. It was a familiar dance.

He and Jango sneaked out in the night and met with the gang. It was dangerous, but they had done this sort of thing before. What worried Jango most was her knees—but the Coyotes had no idea about that. She still looked like a top agent, like she could take them apart with her mind. So it was usually just a matter of bluffing to get the gang to agree to clear out and move off to some other territory.

Jango knew this didn't really solve the case, but that was not her concern. The only real downside for her and her neighborhood was that,

eventually, the gang got new members who hadn't learned the lesson and would try to move back in.

Meanwhile, there were still other ongoing cases. One minor one was keeping an eye on an older woman who lived across from the pond not too far from the office. At first this seemed simple. How much trouble could an old lady get into? But the old lady in question did not want to be watched. She yelled and screamed at them at first, then took to hiding.

So Jango hit on the idea of digging a hole underneath the wall that led into her backyard. That way they could peek in on her unobserved and possibly even patrol around her house if they were careful. Sawyer thought this was nuts and didn't help much with the digging. But Jango doggedly persisted.

She got the idea from an assignment she'd had in Tangiers. Now *that* had been a mission. Sawyer tired of hearing it, but it had been glorious.



## 4 –Tangiers

At the time, Jango still lived in Oakland and showed up for work at Cesar Chavez Park in Berkeley and received her assignment in the usual way. This made her extremely happy. If she didn't get an assignment, she'd have to spend the day pretending to work in the park, and honestly, she wasn't very good at it. Thankfully, on this day, a small cylinder awaited her with the mission details tucked inside.

The paper said, "Wheels up 30 minutes. Tangiers BOB. Scuba gear."

That meant she had 30 minutes from the time she arrived to grab her scuba gear and get to the secret airfield. BOB meant she would be briefed on board.

The paper caught fire and disintegrated, a special feature of the cylinder it was attached to. She went down to the cellar below the office and grabbed her go bag. After stuffing goggles and fins into it, she headed out to the park's far edge.

There was an odd building there, surrounded by barbed wire fencing with danger signs. It looked vaguely electric, so most people stayed far from it. All the park workers thought it was a utility thing and paid no mind to it.

When nobody was looking, she slipped inside to find a dirty spider-ridden shack. That's all anyone saw unless they knew the combination of buttons to press on the rusty panel by the door. Upon pressing the right combo, the wood floor slid back and Jango walked down smooth steel stairs a few feet to another, cleaner wall of buttons. She pressed the one marked A. Two metal doors slid open and she walked inside and rode the elevator down to the airfield.

While everyone called it the "secret airfield," it was really more of a gargantuan hangar. More than 50 airplanes stood at the ready. Jango's commanding officer met her near a sleek Canadair jet.

"Don't look at me like that, Jango," the CO said. "It's plenty big enough. Jango grunted. She was known for complaining of the cramped feeling on Canadairs. If she had to fly in something that small, why not make it a luxury jet?"

"Ten minutes to take off."

Jango grunted again and boarded the plane. The pilot and her handler, Howard, were already on board. She sat down in silence and waited for departure.

Planes from the airfield had to taxi out of the hangar down a large tunnel before they reached the runway several miles away. Even then, the first half of the runway was below ground. The plane conducted its usual maddening take-off sequence of hurtling through an impossibly tight tunnel and then bursting into sunlight just as the lift began to pull the plane up into the air. They exited the far side of the Berkley Hills unobserved and climbed straight up into the sky.

When they reached cruising altitude, Howard began the briefing.

“An asset has been compromised and captured by a previously unknown group calling themselves ‘Le Majeste.’ The asset in question is codenamed Zeke. He’s a nervous type but competent. Le Majeste—or LM, as we’re calling them—demand money, weapons and the usual release of members, none of whom we can identify as being in custody anywhere. We’re fairly certain it’s a front for another agency trying to milk more information out of Zeke and see how we react. They’ve threatened to kill Zeke by sundown tomorrow if we don’t respond. We know where he’s being held but it’s impenetrable and unobservable.”

Howard laid out an array of photographs, maps and blueprints. Jango studied them.

“We need you to come up with a plan for recon and entry.” Howard looked directly into Jango’s eyes. “The best minds we have are stumped on this one, J. We need your brain.”

Jango nodded and turned back to the blueprints. She pointed at a large retaining wall.

“We’ve thought of that,” Howard said, acknowledging the possible tunneling point. “But how do we know we won’t tunnel up right underneath their guardhouse or into the middle of an army?”

Jango explained just how they’d do that.

They landed in Tangiers and immediately headed out to an observation post near the complex. Howard hadn’t been kidding. The complex was situated on a flat plain with no covered ways to approach. Towering walls topped with fine mesh and barbed wire surrounded the complex, hiding the interior from view. The only thing visible from outside was a nest of guards with AK-47s pointed in every possible direction.

“Do you really think this can work?” Howard asked. Jango nodded and took off down the hill. Before she got within sight of the guards of the complex, she turned and walked along a line of vegetation.

At a seemingly random point she began to dig. She kept digging until she had a hole she could fit in. Then she began to dig forward, pulling some of the brush with her. She wasn't digging a tunnel, but a trench.

As she moved, the dirt collapsed behind her, filling in the evidence of her passage. From far above on the high walls of the complex, it must have looked like a group of branches blowing slowly along the ground. There was just enough wind to make that plausible. She dug at an impressive rate, eventually reaching the wall and disappearing under it.

Inside was nothing. There was no encampment, only Zeke strapped to a chair. All the men in the complex were on the walls to make it look as if they had a huge complement of people. In fact the complex was all walls, roof and netting. It was an old fortification, shored up to look vast and modern from the outside.

Jango signaled for Zeke to be quiet and ran quietly and quickly across the yard to undo Zeke's bonds. The guards didn't turn toward them once.

She led Zeke to the hole she had climbed out of and suddenly sneezed without warning. It just came out. Every guard on the walls looked down and began to shout and, more dangerously, shoot. Zeke and Jango scrambled into the hole. Zeke made to plow ahead but Jango stopped him.

She waited until she heard the guards coming toward their tunnel. Zeke looked at her like she was crazy. It sounded like every guard in the place was coming toward them and getting uncomfortably close. Jango was counting on it. She waited as long as she could then urged him forward and burst into a run herself. They popped up out of the hole and didn't bother to cover themselves or dig back in the trench, sprinting toward the vegetation and cover instead.

Jango made as sure as she could that no guards waited up above them to shoot as they came out of the hole. She hadn't dug straight in anyway so they had no way of knowing where they would exit. She saw one guard had been placed on the wall directly where she had entered the hole inside the wall, but he was out of range.

The guards spilling out of the hole behind her were more of a threat, but she thought she could outrun them as long as Zeke kept up. Suddenly fire came from the observation post and the pursuers dropped

back. This gave them an extra burst of confidence and the energy to make it back.

She proudly presented Zeke to Howard when they returned. He didn't bother to berate her for going beyond mission parameters and risking an international incident. There would be time for that later.

They needed to haul out of there before the guards got back into range.

Zeke took the jet back with them and stayed very quiet. Jango wasn't sure but she thought he was shaking. Howard explained that he didn't like to travel.

He also explained that she better thank him for not putting her on report for her reckless actions. Jango just looked pointedly at Zeke.

"Yeah, I know. This was the ultimate goal. And you shortened the timeline on the operation considerably."

Jango pointed out that she saved them a lot of money.

"No, you can't have a cut," Howard told her. "But you can keep your job."

Jango just grinned.

She kept that lesson with her. Dig in fast, get what you need, and get out. Someday Sawyer would understand. There was a time for patience and persistence and a time for the all-out sprint. You just had to know the right time for each. That was the trick.

## 5 – San Rafael

That weekend Jango went with Eileen for a walk. The yellow grass bent in the wind as they walked on the wide fire road through the hills surrounding the neighborhood. Eileen talked of her job, TV shows and other inconsequential things to Jango. But Jango didn't mind. In fact she liked it when Eileen talked like this. Anything inconsequential was a relief.

Jango's job had so much importance placed on it, and her past carried so much weight, that hearing about *X Factor* or *Vampire Diaries* was a welcome distraction. Over the years she had gone from hating TV to plopping down on the couch and enjoying taking her mind off things as much as anyone else. It was just that, with her level of responsibility, she didn't get the luxury of uninterrupted TV watching very often. The world always intruded.

Throughout the walk, Jango found excuses to wander off and look for signs of the Coyotes. She gathered quite a bit of evidence based on tracks and other indications of their passing. She found several things they had left or dropped as they moved through the hills. By the end of the walk she had a pretty good idea where the Coyotes were holing up and how many of them there were. Sawyer could take it from there.

Though he didn't have the same formal training as Jango, Sawyer had street smarts. He had survived in Merced on his wits. Without wits, a slightly built young boy like Sawyer wouldn't have survived at all. His ability to sneak into the Coyotes' camp and leave a message came from his history of sneaking and taking.

## 6 – Merced

When Sawyer was still very young he often found himself very hungry. Late at night he would prowls through the back streets in search of something to eat. He had a naturally high amount of nervous energy. That made it all the more important that he eat.

One typical night, in some nameless back alley, he had caught a whiff of something delicious. He followed the smell and found a group gathered in a corner of a junkyard. They stood around eating a large amount of what smelled like some kind of beef. Sawyer slowed down. He didn't know much, but he had a good brain for figuring things out, and he was hungry. He broke the problem down into parts. He had charm, something not likely to be valuable to behemoths chowing down on beef. So he discarded ideas of talking his way into some food.

He had stealth, which would serve him well if he could get them away from their meal just far enough that he could dart in and grab a hunk for himself. He needed a distraction. He circled out of sight from the group and found what he was looking for. A large pile of tin cans rested on a plank of some kind, probably a discarded door. If he pushed the cans up to the top of the plank, their weight would slowly bring the plank down and then the cans would fall off.

It should fall slowly enough to give him enough time to circle around behind the group. Hopefully they would all move off to investigate the noise. He got the cans in place and ran around into position behind the group right as they fell. Looking only in front of him, he smiled as the entire group ran off angrily, not looking behind them.

He shot into their camp and began tearing at the meat. It was so succulent and good that he had a hard time pulling himself away. He knew he had to move fast before they came back. He was swallowing one last hunk and carrying off a new bit when he heard a noise behind him in the opposite direction from where the group ran off. When he turned his head, a giant of a man stood with something long and flat in his hand.

“What do you think you’re doing with the meat I gave my boys?! Get out of here!”

Sawyer had forgotten to look behind and the man had sneaked up and caught him. The man began to strike Sawyer with the long flat thing, maybe it was a board or a flyswatter—he never got a good look.

He yelped and almost choked on the beef but held on to it. He began running away, but that took him in the direction of the group, already returning from their disappointing find. They caught sight of him and chased him. With five of them on his tail, he sped to the right and barely made it out of the junkyard.

He thought he might collapse from starvation as he ran, but the bit of beef he managed to swallow gave him just enough energy to get away. When he finally got clear enough to slow down he stopped and panted so hard he couldn't eat the last bit for several minutes. All in all it had been worth it for the food, but he learned a valuable lesson of stealth. Always check behind you.

## 7 – San Rafael

Sawyer kept all his lessons in mind as he crept up the darkened hill carrying a message for the Coyotes. He heard them off in the distance howling with laughter. It reminded him of that group he had fooled all those years ago, and it made him hungry for beef.

He kept alert and moved fast but silently, following Jango's tips, until he found the Coyotes' lair. This was the hardest part for him. He should leave his message and go, but the unprotected lair sorely tempted his curiosity. He dropped the message straightaway then lingered, poking through some of the things the gang kept in their hideout.

A silver box intrigued him. What would a gang use a silver box for? Drugs? Weapons? Jewelry?

He was debating with himself about opening the box when he heard a noise. The gang had left the youngest member to watch over the camp. This youthful Coyote hadn't noticed Sawyer and was walking lazily back from farther up the hill, carrying some food. The youngster had slacked on watch duties just when Sawyer showed up, otherwise the alarm would have been raised.

Now Sawyer was stuck. If he moved, the young gang member would certainly see him. Even if he stayed still, he'd probably be seen eventually. There were no planks and cans to help him with a distraction this time.

He looked at the silver box.

Carefully and quietly, he picked up the box and tossed it as far as he could. It wasn't far, but it was far enough to get the young gangster to turn away from him. Then Sawyer took off like a shot, hoping the boy wouldn't look behind. He didn't. Sawyer got away clean.

When he got home he told Jango the whole story, including his fascination with the odd silver box. She lectured him on the need to be more careful and told him to forget what was in the box. They agreed to meet with the Coyotes the next evening.

Jango and Sawyer waited under the big tree. Its shadow barely hid them from the light of a full moon. Soon a dozen Coyotes crested the hill. Sawyer noticed the young boy gangster from the previous night. He assumed this meant they left nobody behind to guard the camp. This must be all of them.



Jango strode up looking as big and powerful as she could. The main gang leader was big as well but still smaller than Jango. Sawyer flanked Jango and tried to look imposing. He was barely bigger than the young boy gangster, but he could look tough enough to seem twice his size.

Jango delivered her usual ultimatum about territories and rights and behaviors and asked the gang, politely, to get off her turf.

The Coyote leader acted as Jango expected, blustering about their gang's strength, giving some respect to Jango's obvious power, and then agreeing to temporarily leave the area. This was all familiar territory for Jango. Then came a condition. The gang leader wanted his silver box back.

Jango prided herself on never flinching in situations like this but could not stop a sideward glance at Sawyer. Still, she pleaded ignorance.

The gang leader made clear that an important silver box had disappeared from their camp the same time the message from Jango appeared. He wanted the box back, and then they would be on their way. But not before.

Jango made it clear that they did not have the box and the gang leader pointed out that what they did have, then, was a problem. Jango gave in and asked Sawyer if he knew anything about it.

All Sawyer could do was relate the story, begrudgingly revealing how he had sneaked in the camp. How he was almost caught by the youngster, and then how he threw the box and ran.

The gang leader huffed at this and Jango could tell he might not have agreed to vacate the territory so easily if he had known this story. Then he turned toward the youngster and asked him about it.

The youngster snapped that he didn't know what Sawyer was talking about.

The leader growled the question again.

The youngster just glared back. The pack leader got in the youngster's face and the boy admitted he had found the silver box in the weeds last night after a suspicious noise and figured it had been dropped accidentally. He claimed it was his now since it would have been lost otherwise.

Things got dicey then. The gang leader drove the youngster away and told him never to come back—an uncomfortable situation for Jango and Sawyer and, frankly, for the rest of the Coyotes to witness. It also showed the gang leader's power, diminishing Jango's standing. Luckily they had already bargained.

When it was over, the gang leader calmly informed Jango that he would hold to their bargain, but if circumstances drove his group back this way, he might not agree to it a second time.

Jango only nodded and held her ground until the Coyotes departed. She had bought some time, but her strategy would not work again.

Jango and Sawyer went back to their other cases, including the hunt for the Grey Man. They spotted him here and there, but it was moving into the rainy season, and the scoundrel ventured forth less when it was wet. Caseloads dropped quite a bit during that time of year too, and Sawyer often caught Jango napping on the couch when she was supposed to be working.

Jango felt embarrassed getting caught by her junior and snapped at him a few times. Sawyer learned the hard way to leave it alone.

## 8 – Oakland

When they lived in Oakland and Jango was still an agent, she tried to get Sawyer on at the Agency. Howard was skeptical but gave him a shot.

“We’re going to keep you on a short leash,” Howard told Sawyer before they went out for a trial run one day. “I hear you had some pretty hard times in Merced, and I’ll cut you some slack, but no crazy stuff. If I see you acting out, or losing your head, we’re done.”

Sawyer understood and just smiled a big smile as they headed out. The mission was routine, a good one for a recruit to prove himself on. There was a foreign agent surveilling the park. Whether they suspected Jango’s cover story, had learned about the underground airfield, or perhaps just thought it would make a good cover of their own, nobody knew. What they did know was that they had to unmask the spy and send him packing.

Jango handled the actual confrontation. That was one of her specialties. It was one of her career talents that later helped her deal with the Coyotes. As a recruit, Sawyer couldn’t act in any official capacity so all he had to do was scout, keep an eye out in the known places and report back when he saw the spy. He figured he had it down. Jango headed off to the park office on her own to maintain cover, and Howard and Sawyer went for a pleasant walk in the park. Every so often Sawyer would wander away from Howard to investigate one of the known spots. Everything went well until near mid-afternoon.

Sawyer was checking a picnic table up on a high hill when he saw the spy. He fit the description perfectly: long nose, long, dark brown hair and Asian features. As soon as Sawyer saw the spy, he was supposed to go to Howard who would take it from there. Sawyer couldn’t help himself.

He began to shout and yell. At first it was with surprise at actually seeing the spy. Then he imagined what this guy might do to Jango, the only friend he had in the world, and his surprise turned into anger.

The spy, startled, got up and began to walk away. Sawyer chased after him. He heard Howard running up the hill yelling, but Sawyer ignored him. Sawyer entered his red zone, a state he’d developed in his years in Merced as a safety mechanism. Once he hit the red zone he was hardly in control of himself, and he would barely remember later what

he'd done. You didn't want to be anywhere near him when he was like that.

He had almost caught up with the spy when he jerked back suddenly. Howard had caught up with him.

"ENOUGH!" Howard was yelling. "You can't—" he trailed off. The spy was now running away as fast as his legs would carry him.

Howard and Sawyer didn't speak as they walked back to the car. Sawyer stayed there while Howard went to get Jango.

Sawyer heard them talking as they came up to the car. "I'm sorry," Howard was saying, "He's a really sweet kid, so I see why you want to give him a chance. But this just won't work. He's too hotheaded. I mean, I'll come visit and hang out with him, if you just want him to have someone else to talk to, but he can't do this."

Sawyer didn't hear what Jango said but he knew she agreed. Nobody said anything as they drove back.

When Howard left, Jango told Sawyer he failed the test and he wouldn't get placed with the Agency. Instead of getting angry, as Sawyer had expected, Jango said it was probably time for her to leave the Agency soon anyway. She wanted to set up her own modest, local practice. She'd want Sawyer's help with that. He needed to keep up his training. So Jango promised to find another way to get him in shape.

Howard was as good as his word. He came by to visit almost every day just to talk with Sawyer. It wasn't the only thing that helped Sawyer get grounded again, but it certainly helped.

## 9 – San Rafael

Sawyer thought about Oakland a lot while out jogging with his running partner, Tom. He had come a long way since then. In fact, when he first started jogging with his friend Tom, Sawyer had still been a bit of a hothead. He'd get tired and lag behind and complain about the running. So much so that Tom stopped running with him for a while. Sawyer even got in shouting matches with a couple of others on the street for no apparent reason. Tom put his foot down and told Sawyer if he was going to do that kind of thing, then he could find another running partner.

If this had happened back when Sawyer lived in Oakland, he probably would have told Tom to take a flying leap. He'd learned a lot since then. He took the advice and promised to calm down, and he did. If anything, he was occasionally just a little too happy when he met people while jogging. He'd learned that at school.

When Sawyer failed to get a job at the Agency, Jango thought he should go back to school. She got him into a place in San Francisco that gathered together others like Sawyer and helped them help each other. If he hit the red zone, he would be separated and given a chance to calm down. He wasn't the only one who had a red zone either. It was such a relief to learn that others had this problem. That knowledge alone almost cured him.

He also got physical training and exercise and was exposed to a lot of different perspectives. He was exhausted by the end of each day, but it helped. He blew up at Jango less and even began to take better care of himself and the apartment.

He also learned skills that would help him get a job. That was a crucial element of Jango's plan. She wanted Sawyer to become a silent and mostly unknown partner in her firm. It was an effect of her long Agency training to keep the enemy in the dark. Sawyer had to be the secret part. It was impossible for Jango to lay low and still get business. She had to advertise her existence if she hoped to get clients. Everyone would know she was a private investigator, and in her mind they should think of her as the de facto sheriff, of the neighborhood. Bad actors wouldn't make any mistakes or drop any tips when she was around.

Sawyer, on the other hand, was just a working stiff. They may or may not know that he lived with Jango, but they wouldn't think of him

as the law and therefore be much more likely to drop a lead, even if they were being careful.

After a year of school for Sawyer, Jango insisted they move. They were both too well-known in Oakland. So she found an office and home in San Rafael, north of San Francisco. That meant Sawyer had to leave school.

The hardest part of moving to San Rafael for Sawyer was saying goodbye to the people at the school. But they understood. They wanted to see their students mature, heal and gain skills to move on into the working world. Sawyer had developed a talent for organizing folks at the school. He wasn't a hall monitor or prefect or anything uncool like that, but if they were doing anything that required a little order, Sawyer was the man to help. He took on quite a few projects and earned enough experience to get a job as a project manager in nearby Petaluma.

It was a part-time job but it filled the bill perfectly as far as Jango was concerned. Sawyer had enough time to help out on cases, but he left Jango enough time to herself to think, plan strategies and question witnesses without Sawyer getting in the way or compromising his own cover.

Sawyer grew fond of the place he worked, called PDP, He especially liked Thursdays when there always seemed to be big things going down. His favorite co-workers were in then. His boss, John, was a gem and treated him well. Sawyer considered that a lucky break when he thought about some of Jango's early bosses. He had a great teacher in San Francisco and now a great boss in Petaluma. It helped him leave his past firmly behind and become a productive member of society. Having a secret identity didn't hurt either.

## 10 – San Rafael

Sawyer enjoyed jogging. He still lagged a little, especially in the early part of the run, but Tom was a good running partner. Sawyer didn't want to talk a bunch on a run. He just wanted someone to help him keep the pace and push him a little. That's exactly what Tom did. Every so often Sawyer would try to get them to stop to say hi to someone so he could prove that he wasn't a jerk who always picked fights. Still, Tom usually urged them to just keep going. Sometimes all you needed to cheer up your day was a good, honest run, especially in the beautiful hills that surrounded their neighborhood. Sawyer bounced ideas off Tom every once in a while, but mostly he just enjoyed the quiet sense of belonging, of being included. He hadn't had that much growing up.

He barely remembered his early childhood. Maybe it was blocked out. His earliest memory was of running with a pack of kids. Brothers? Sisters? He didn't know. He just remembered being with a family, feeling good, having fun—and the next thing he knew, they were gone. He had turned a corner thinking they were behind him. He darted madly back the way he came, looking everywhere. He had no idea where they could have gone. He tried every alleyway and every corner. He couldn't find them anywhere. That was the first time he felt the crushing sense of loneliness that would haunt him until he landed with Jango.

The loneliness still haunted him, but what he felt now was only a shadow of the intense, painful gap he felt back then. His loneliness took over his entire personality during his days on the street. It drove him—he was pretty sure it drove him mad. It's where the red zone came from. He shuddered to think what would have become of him if Jango hadn't taken him in. He'd be in prison, or worse.

One day Sawyer called in sick. This was extremely unusual for him and Jango worried. She had gone through many health problems when she was younger, but those had usually been directly related to her work for the Agency. She had built up tolerances to most poisons but there had been one very close call. Since her retirement, she had been in relatively good health—great health if you didn't count her knee.

When Sawyer complained of stomach problems and stayed home, Jango immediately jumped to the conclusion that he had been poisoned. She tried to get him to take all manner of tests, but Sawyer

resisted. He just wanted to lie down and rest. That only worried Jango more as Sawyer never rested. Sawyer finally told Jango that Tom had the stomach problem too, so it probably was just going around. He asked if Jango thought Tom had been poisoned too. Jango didn't answer, just huffed and walked away.

In a strange way it was lucky that Sawyer stayed home. He really wasn't incapacitated; he just didn't feel much like being around other people or away from his own house. So Jango went to the office and Sawyer stayed in bed—at least until Jango came rushing back to the house. They had a case. Sawyer tried to insist that he was sick, but it was a weak defense. Somehow Jango could tell he wanted to relieve the boredom.

Something had been disturbing a few gardens behind the houses along the streambed, so the neighbors hired Jango and Sawyer to investigate and determine who had been traipsing through the gardens and for what purpose. If it was robbery, then they were to collect evidence and bring it in to the police. Jango sat down and began to plan a strategy. She started talking about angles and vectors and cutting for sign and how to preserve evidence. She was so lost in thought that it was a few minutes before she realized Sawyer had grabbed his things and was already out the door.



## 11 – San Rafael

Three gardens had been attacked. The owners were upset that their plants had been damaged or destroyed. Even worse than that was the idea that someone was messing about behind their houses—it made them uneasy. It was not unheard of for professional burglars to come across the Richmond Bridge or even down the 101 from Santa Rosa. Those gangs had nothing to do with the Coyotes. They didn't set up residence—they just used the neighborhood as sort of an ATM.

Jango tried to push her crime scene strategy on Sawyer, but he was having none of it. Maybe it was because he was sick, but he ignored Jango's huffing and puffing. He marched into the backyard without alerting the homeowners. They were all at work anyway, right?

The gardens were devastated, right down the rows. Tomato vines were ripped down and carrots dug up, some half eaten and left on the ground. Whole patches of ground were laid bare, showing no indication of what they had been before. Even an apple tree had long gouges in its bark. At first Sawyer thought someone, a very hungry someone, had broken in just to steal the food.

But on second look, Sawyer noticed much of the food, like the carrots, had been left behind. Trails sometimes led up to the back doors of the houses, which made both of them suspect burglars. However, nothing was taken. The police wanted more evidence before they would begin a full-scale investigation. That's why the neighbors had turned to Jango and Sawyer.

While Jango reprimanded Sawyer for polluting the scene and covering tracks, Sawyer sniffed around in the bushes and hedges that surrounded the yards. He noticed wet spots leading up from the creek and figured the intruders had entered the yards that way. But why?

It was too messy for a burglary. Why destroy the gardens if you just wanted to break into the house? And if you just wanted to steal from the gardens, why leave the food and investigate the houses? There was more food than you could carry in the gardens without taking the risk of breaking into the houses. Sawyer stopped. Unless it was vengeance.

Sawyer suggested the idea to Jango. Jango nodded. If it was vengeance, Jango and Sawyer could wait inside their own house. The creek ran through their garden as well, and if it was who they suspected, they'd catch the perp tonight. They went home to set up the stakeout.

Jango had fallen asleep and Sawyer was dozing lightly when a noise brought him back to full alert. He woke Jango. They heard a rustling in their garden. Someone was either destroying their admittedly spare garden or passing through along the creek. They rushed outside.

Jango ran to one end of the garden and Sawyer to the other and they converged along the creek until they caught a fat old guy in a mask between them. They approached slowly because he was armed with some sharp blades. He hissed at them when he saw who they were.

Jango began to shout at him in anger. It was The Bandit. They didn't know his real name. They had never apprehended him or been able to turn him over to police. He was a slippery character, even as fat as he was. He knew a back way out of every location, no matter what it was—even a wide-open plain.

But they had him between them now and he couldn't get away. Jango's shouting must have shaken him up. The Bandit readily admitted he was wreaking vengeance against the three houses. Recently they'd booby-trapped the creek. He used the creek to get around without being seen, and he never bothered them. Why would they sabotage it?

Jango explained that the people probably saw him sneaking around and didn't like him trespassing. So he'd better just hand himself over now.

The Bandit laughed and brandished his weapons. He implied that Jango might want to rethink any demands she wanted to make and instead consider just getting out of the way.

The conversation carried on in this vein for a while, and then, suddenly, the lights on Jango and Sawyer's back porch came on.

"Back here officer," said a female voice. Eileen came through the back door followed by a police officer.

The Bandit tried to bolt but Jango forced him back, risking getting a scratch or two and causing Eileen to squeal. The officer quickly nabbed The Bandit. She had him restrained quickly and led him around front to a waiting car.

Jango congratulated Eileen on fulfilling her part of the plan. She had to let Eileen in a little more on what they were doing of course, but it had been worth it. Now The Bandit would be behind bars where he couldn't bother anyone's gardens anymore.

Jango told Sawyer it was lucky he was sick and congratulated him on thinking and executing a good plan.

Sawyer just dragged himself off back to bed, though he secretly smiled at himself. Jango may have bossed him around a lot, but she didn't give compliments out often. He agreed that he'd done a pretty good job.

## 12 – Monte Carlo

Jango hadn't always been grumpy. She *had* always been serious, but her grumpiness came with her knee problems. It was a torn ligament, just like baseball and football players get. She had been a pro Frisbee player for a while and also competed in various extreme sports like wave jumping and freestyle Xpogo. All of that ended when she tore her knee ligament.

She considered having surgery. The doctors all said she'd get back almost full range of motion, but they worried about her age and her past health problems. It was no good her pointing out that her past health problems were mostly caused by foreign agents nor that the only cure was to avoid the constant poisoning attempts. There was nothing anyone could do about that now. But it was why the doctors persuaded her to hold off, explaining that if the knee pain got bad, or if she found it inhibiting her life, then she could always still get the surgery.

She decided to give it a little time before deciding if surgery was really necessary.

She discovered that not competing in ill-attended sporting ventures for little or no pay didn't wreck her life. Far from it—she discovered she liked the simple life. Sometimes, when the caseload was light, she would just go down to the pond and sit, looking out over the water and thinking. She discovered she actually loved TV. She had always disdained it. When anyone would turn on the TV in the past, especially when she worked at the Agency, she would leave the room to do something more productive. Not anymore! Now she watched it all, from high-quality HBO dramas to cheap reality fare like *The Voice*. She ate it all up.

But sometimes the knee ached. Not hurt, mind you, just ached. And sometimes she just got the urge to jump—to soar into the sky and catch a disc, move it down the field. She missed that. Which is why she hated Monte Carlo. Because it was in Monte Carlo where she tore the ligament.

The assignment had taken her to a posh private resort—a castle, actually, that was trying to recapture the spirit of the 1960s. Or at least trying to recapture what people who had watched old movies set in the

1960s in Monte Carlo thought the 1960s were like. In any case, there was a lot of gambling and drinking and fine-looking clothing and cars.

During the day, guests sunned themselves on the back patio, wandered in a garden maze, or swam in one of three immense pools. The first pool was an Olympic-sized swimming pool meant for doing laps. Uphill and to the right of the garden maze was a second lounging pool meant for dipping in every so often just to refresh yourself. Up a flight of wooden stairs from there was the masterpiece pool that attracted everyone's attention—the sky pool.

It was an architectural marvel. From below it looked like a fuzzy spot in the sky because the floor was translucent concrete. It allowed just enough light through to look like a hazy cloud. From above, you saw the most impressive eternity pool ever as the water became sky-colored and appeared to go on forever. It was immense.

Unfortunately, Jango's mission didn't have much to do with the pools. She was after a USB key that held some very important data—data she knew nothing about. The contents of the drive were need-to-know—and she didn't. All she needed to know was that a man who called himself Duke had the key. Intelligence said he kept it on him at all times. Her job was to get it.

She deftly got into his good graces by talking pastries. Duke loved pastries. He told her how he once jumped from a moving car just to sample what turned out to be the most divine cake he had ever tasted. She wasn't sure he was serious but he swore it was true. He had been in the passenger seat when they drove past a party. He smelled a chocolate cake the likes of which he had never smelled before or since. Just that one waft of it as they drove by was enough to drive him mad.

Without even asking the driver to slow down, he jumped from the car, ran into the party and took a slice for himself. The partygoers were shocked, of course, and he made sure they got a generous check in compensation for the disturbance. He never regretted it.

Jango laughed uproariously at the story. She wasn't even acting. She found it truly hilarious. In fact, given different circumstances she might have found herself quite attracted to Duke. But she was a professional agent and put any feelings aside. She pried Duke away from the party and took him outside for a walk and then up to the lounging pool. She hoped to get him to the bushes where she could make her move and then get away but he seemed obsessed with the lounging pool for some reason. She couldn't figure out why. There was no cake there.

Finally she realized that the lounging pool got its name from the kind of lounging one did at night. She sensed a few couples hidden in dark corners poolside. She went with it as far as she needed and rather easily got the USB key. She was congratulating herself for the deception when Duke discovered she had the key. She hadn't gotten it away fast enough. He began to shout and she ran. He chased her and she took off up the steps to the eternity pool. As she ran, she felt a tweak in her knee. She had pulled something but she kept going. He was yelling and she figured she just needed to keep away from him long enough for others to come see what the noise was about.

It turned out she didn't need to kill as much time as she thought. She was gone racing down the long side of the pool and right as she reached the turn, the tweak in her knee turned into a searing pain. She stopped short and yelped both at the pain in her knee and the realization she would shortly be caught.

Duke was closer to her than she thought and when she pulled up abruptly, he went barreling past her, right over the edge of the eternity pool, into eternity. Jango limped back down the stairs. Everyone who was a witness to the event ignored her and followed the sound of Duke's yowls as he fell.

Her mission was successful but she would never look at stairs the same way again. Jango tried to hide her knee problems for a couple more missions, but the Agency noticed it. The field jobs had become sporadic anyway, and after the doctor discovered the torn ligament, that was it. She was told in very polite terms that she would be welcomed back at any time on a consultative basis, but she would no longer be put in the field. Her career was over.

She moped a bit, but eventually devoted herself full time to her own investigations. That's when she began to enjoy sitting on the couch, watching TV.

### 13 – Beirut

The morning after they caught The Bandit, Jango was up early. She tried not to wake Sawyer but couldn't help it. Her stomach was bothering her something awful. Every so often she let out an involuntary, low moan. Usually, eating breakfast helped when her stomach was bothering her, but she had no appetite at all. She looked at the food, wanted to eat it, but she couldn't bring herself to put it in her mouth. She tried different foods and eventually found a combination that she could tolerate and wolfed down what she could.

Other than her knee, her stomach was the only health problem she had from her Agency days. It didn't act up all that often, just enough to remind her of the many times she had been poisoned. A Hong Kong gang had force-fed her some kind of meat with barbecue sauce that also had a horse's dosage of sodium pentothal in it. She'd been sick for a week, and definitely off her breakfast, but she hadn't spilled any secrets—at least none the gang cared about. The one she divulged about her friend Eileen dancing to 1980s hits didn't seem to interest them.

She'd been dosed with strychnine at least a dozen times. Usually in a drink, or some kind of passed hors d'oeuvres. She'd survived other more insidious attempts, some from poisons she didn't even know the names of, and some poisons were as simple as lead or high quantities of acetaminophen. The one in Beirut had been the worst.

Jango landed in the morning, and by evening, unmasked an Iranian provocateur, foiled three planned suicide bombings, upset an attempt to discredit the moderates in government, and rescued a political prisoner from the hands of a new and rather nasty terrorist group called the Kalibs.

The mission had only called for locating the operations of the Kalibs, but it turned out to be so easy that Jango felt it would have been negligent not to mount a rescue. She could not understand how the group had stayed hidden for so long. They left a million clues and their prisoner was lightly guarded.

Initially Jango's team reported that the Kalibs had assigned most of their members to planning bombings, believing they had hid the location of the prisoner well enough. Jango found the place rather quickly with some ingenious deduction from a few intercepted messages.

She met one of her trusted informants at a teahouse. He explained the contents of the intercepted messages including what a few

key pieces of the code meant. For instance, “The Bazaar” was a market not far from the teahouse. The “clothes seller” was code for a building locally known for all the laundry hanging outside its windows. From there, it was rather easy to decipher numbers and addresses, rooms and schedules.

She didn’t like how nervous her informant had been, but informants were jumpy, so she didn’t think anything of it. So what if he didn’t drink his tea? The information he gave panned out. They pulled off one of their biggest ops ever. She came home a hero. No harm no foul, until the nausea hit.

She had only been in Beirut for a day. She was home and in bed when it hit. This was before Sawyer moved in, so she just ambled off to the bathroom alone in the middle of the night, several times. She was miserable, but she figured it was a flare-up. She had been poisoned a few times already at that point and was used to the idea that her stomach would always give her problems.

The next day though she met Howard for a debriefing and he pointed out that she had a nosebleed. He asked her if she had any other symptoms. She said she felt fine. Again, that night she felt awful. She called Eileen. Eileen always seemed to know the right medicine. But this time, nothing Eileen did worked.

“You need to go to the doctor,” Eileen told Jango, looking sad.

The Doctor did not like what she saw and kept Jango overnight while she waited for blood tests. The tests showed a dangerously low blood platelet count. Her body wasn’t making enough platelets to carry out the functions of the blood, like delivering nutrition. Her white count wasn’t significantly high, so they ruled out an infection. Had she been near anything toxic? Not this time, she explained, and then it hit her. The tea. Why hadn’t he drunk the tea? It was too late to run a tox screen, but that had to be it.

Just to be safe, the Agency tested all the foodstuffs on the Agency’s plane but came up blank. They looked for the informant to question him but he was off the map. Nobody knew where he went.

The doctor sent Jango home to wait. Without knowing the toxin, she would just have to hope that she didn’t drink enough of the tea to kill her. The doctor warned her not to cut herself because her body wasn’t making enough platelets to assure her blood would clot, and she could bleed to death. She was off duty for a week.

Eileen was on pins and needles around her. Tom was also concerned. He tried to keep her entertained with low-impact, no-



chance-of-getting-cut entertainment. But Jango was too bored to really be entertained—and too frightened to concentrate. She missed her job at the park, as fake as it was. She missed being able to walk around without looking for sharp edges. She missed not worrying that she wouldn't wake up when she went to sleep. Most of all, she missed her missions.

A week after the mission to Beirut she went back to the doctor. She told them she felt perfectly normal and the nosebleeds hadn't returned. They ran another blood test and sent her home to wait. This wait was worse than the first one. The first time, she had been disoriented by the shock of the situation and slept on and off in the hospital. This time she was alert and awake for every second of the 24 hours it took to get the test results. When the call came, Jango made Eileen answer it.

“Uh huh. OK. Thank you.”

Jango looked at her expectantly.

“Your platelet levels are back to normal. You're free to go back to work, but you still need to take it easy for another week. They want to do another blood test before they approve you for full time.”

What Eileen didn't know was that meant no active Agency duty. She'd have to actually work at the park for a week. Hopefully she could get some consulting assignments, otherwise she'd go mad with boredom. It would be good to see Howard again, in any case.

A week later, her platelet count was above normal. The doctor wrote it off as a freak accident. Jango wrote it off as a lesson to trust your instincts when they nag at you.

## 14 – San Francisco

On rainy days, Jango and Sawyer had a tradition. If Eileen or Tom showed up while it was raining, they skipped it, but if those two weren't around, they pulled out the chess set.

Jango liked to sharpen her wits and test Sawyer's strategy. She would often lecture him on the importance of thinking ahead and use their chess games as examples.

Sawyer liked it because he liked games and he knew he needed to work on his patience. Maybe it was a result of having no structure in his youth, but he had a hard time concentrating on any one thing for a long period of time. Chess focused him. His competitive spirit motivated him to try to beat Jango, and she was not easy to beat, though he had gotten to the point that he could take a game or two every now and then.

As they played, Jango would reminisce about particular strategic criminals she'd run up against. Sawyer encouraged these stories, partly because it took her attention off the game and partly because the stories were truly fascinating. One of his favorites to hear about was Lilly.

Jango came across Lilly early in her career when she was still in training. Lilly was a big woman and extraordinarily smart. Jango sometimes forgot how strong Lilly was since their battles were mental, not physical. Lilly was a small-time thug in San Francisco. She worked her territory near the park and ruled a vast underground crime syndicate. One of Jango's earliest assignments was to infiltrate Lilly's gang—and undo it.

Infiltrating turned out to be difficult. Lilly hated Jango from the moment they met in Golden Gate Park. A friend made the introduction and Lilly started by insulting Jango's looks, how she talked, even how she smelled. Jango gave it right back to her. At first Jango thought Lilly was testing her to see what she was made of. Not Lilly. She was a loose cannon. She didn't test—she commanded abject obedience, and when Jango didn't show that, they clashed. Lilly didn't suspect Jango was an investigator. What investigator would come out and insult the suspect like that? Jango had taken this into account when choosing to be confrontational, but very quickly the confrontation became real, and it didn't stop until Jango moved away and left Lilly behind.

To this day Lilly may not know Jango was an infiltrator. Jango never blew her cover, even though she undermined one of the greatest heists Lilly had ever planned.

It all started on a normal afternoon in Golden Gate Park, where Lilly held court. Lilly told a gathering of some her favorite minions about a plan to rip off one of the biggest banks in the city. It was a genius plan, but Lilly needed what she called “smart muscle.” She went on and on about how she needed someone with brains and brawn all in one package.

Everybody around her knew that the best example of that was Jango. She had proved time and again she had the strength and smarts to go toe to toe with Lilly. In fact, if Jango had any interest in becoming a crime boss, she could have started a rival gang. Since she didn’t, Lilly assumed Jango didn’t have the killer instinct needed to lead. This made Lilly disrespect Jango even more. But Lilly knew Jango wasn’t weak. Lilly needed her, so she decided to include Jango in the plans.

Jango was still a fresh recruit at the agency. Her instructions were to go along with the plan as far as needed to gather evidence, then to bow out. She needed a way she could do that without blowing her cover. Her dispute with Lilly not only gave her valuable insights into how a top criminal thought, but it also gave her plausible deniability if she disappeared. She worked hard to position herself as the disrespected freelancer, used when needed, shunned when not.

The bank heist plan required Jango to guard a door and not trip an alarm. At first Jango didn’t see why this needed brains and brawn. It sounded more like a lack of brain damage would have been enough. Then she found out more details. She’d have to overpower a guard. This she could probably justify as long as she didn’t permanently damage the guard, though it was skating close to the line. Not setting off the alarm was another matter. It wasn’t as simple as keeping a door open or making sure not to hit a tripwire.

Jango would have to talk the guard into disabling the alarm before knocking the guard out.

By Jango’s estimation, it was awfully stupid for Lilly to give an outsider like her that position. It was the only position that didn’t require a gun, so maybe that was why. Jango would go around to the rear guard while Lilly and two accomplices went in the front. Then Jango would secure the back way for a quick exit. If Jango failed, Lilly would likely just shoot the guard and make the escape anyway, but it would slow things down and increase their likelihood of getting caught.

The more Jango pondered the possibilities of something going wrong, the less she felt she could allow the plan to go into action. She consulted with her handler at the time, Cody, who advised her against calling it in to the police. It would blow more than just Jango's cover if she did so. Other undercover agents were involved. Jango hadn't realized this and wondered who they were. Cody advised her to go along with the plan and not hurt the guard. If she saw an opportunity to mess up and have Lilly get caught or at least prevented from enacting the plan, then Jango should take it, but only if it didn't reveal who she was and who she was working for.

The day of the plan, Lilly, two gang-members and Jango set out on foot. They would walk to the heist and leave by car to help reduce the chance of getting caught. As they walked toward the bank, Jango noticed Lilly's weapons showed. She thought about ignoring it. Maybe Lilly would get caught and the whole thing would fail. But the sloppiness of it just bothered Jango, so she pointed it out. Lilly never liked being corrected or told something was wrong by her advisors. She snapped at Jango to mind her own business and then hid the weapons.

A police official was not too far away. Jango pointed this out and chastised Lilly for being so careless. This did two things for Jango. First, it definitely made her look like a criminal trying to avoid getting caught. Second, it enraged Lilly. Lilly began to shriek and push Jango. Jango didn't hold back. She got right into Lilly's face and gave back as good as she got.

The police officer ran over and broke up the fight. He immediately asked for identification. Jango of course had legitimate ID and showed it begrudgingly. Lilly had fake credentials, and even those were expired. Jango laughed when the officer pointed this out, causing Lilly to lunge at Jango again. That ended the officer's patience and she hauled Lilly in and told the rest of them to beat it back home.

The next day, a couple of Lilly's boys came to visit. They weren't stupid enough to get rough with Jango but they made it clear that Lilly would not tolerate Jango's face showing up in Lilly's part of Golden Gate Park again. Jango didn't worry. It was a big park.

She only saw Lilly a handful of times after that from a distance. Jango swore she could hear her growl of disapproval from across the park. But Jango had protected her cover, her rep, and didn't damage any

guards in the process. As a bonus, she had foiled a bank robbery. All this led to a good report when her turn came up for assignment.

After she left Lilly's gang but before she got assigned to Oakland, Jango explored various parts of the city with Cody. She wanted to be assigned to Cody's ops, but he mostly did training and only supervised a few active duty agents. Besides, all Cody's work was in San Francisco. He told Jango she needed to see the world while she was young, not get stuck chasing down tax evaders.

Still, Cody enjoyed showing Jango the ropes. They investigated hideouts at Fort Funston, survey points in Twin Peaks and alleyway meeting spots in China Town. They even explored more of Golden Gate Park but made sure to stay well away from Lilly.

One day in the park, Cody was showing Jango drop point scenarios. They went over the classic paper bag in the trashcan of course, as well as the paper bag under the bench and the paper bag left by a lamppost. They pretty much all involved leaving a paper bag somewhere. Finally, he challenged Jango to invent one of her own. She went out into a field and found a hole in the ground. They hadn't covered paper bag in a hole in the ground yet, so she stuck the bag inside where it couldn't be seen. She felt this was better than the scenarios where the paper bags were clearly visible. The lamppost was the worst.

Before she could get the bag too far in, though, she heard Cody yelling at her and warning her away from the hole. Why would he get so angry over her good idea? Just because it wasn't visible? Or was she supposed to only pick from some pre-approved menu of drop spots? Finally Cody got close enough that she could hear.

"BEEEEEEEEESSSSS! GET AWAY FROM THE BEEEEEEEEES!"

Jango finally noticed a cloud of bees buzzing about her. She thought some of them might even have stung her, but she had such thick skin she couldn't be sure. She just stood there looking curiously at the bees. She almost smiled. They were cute and fuzzy and didn't seem to be hurting her.

That didn't calm Cody down. He raced in with his jacket over his head and pulled Jango away from the hole. She went willingly, not wanting Cody to get stung. His skin didn't seem as tough as hers. Once they got away, Cody would not stop lecturing her about paying attention

to surroundings and how those were bees and couldn't she feel them stinging her and what was she thinking anyway?

Jango just nodded and itched a little. She tuned out Cody's lecture and thought how lucky she was that her skin wasn't thin. And how maybe next time she'd pay a little more attention. What if they had been scorpions, after all?

## 15 – San Rafael

Jango stopped telling her stories and leaned back on the couch. Sawyer asked her to go on, but she insisted she was done for now. After all, how much of her old life could Sawyer really be interested in? He wasn't really an agent. She valued him as a partner, but he was haphazard and only partly trained. He still deviated from standard protocols far too often for her taste. He liked to do his own thing. And what was with the hugging? Former street toughs didn't go around hugging people in Jango's experience, yet he hugged everyone.

Jango was not a hugger. She was affectionate, she felt, or at least appreciative, but not a hugger. In her opinions, a formal nod of acknowledgement suited most situations. Sawyer hugged anybody even right after they first met. Jango felt like maybe it was a problem. Could he be easily taken in? Could he be hugged into making a mistake? The thought was ludicrous to Jango. The fact that she even considered it made her sure he could never be an agent. But finally her curiosity got the better of her. She asked him why he hugged people all the time.

When Sawyer had been on the streets of Merced, he survived by making friends. The streets turned some people hard, but it made Sawyer develop his natural charm. The faster he turned on his charm, the faster he could tell if he was dealing with someone he could trust or someone he should avoid. He developed a habit of laying it on thick right away. If a person got offended, he knew to be careful. If they seemed overwhelmed, he knew they lacked confidence. These types were the hardest. He could manipulate them into helping him, but they could also turn against him quickly.

Then there were his favorite, those that just ate it up. They were the folks who decided to help him out no matter what. He didn't have to manipulate or scheme or plan; they just helped him because they liked him. So he'd start each meeting with a hug, not because he was a lover boy, but as a litmus test. He even learned how to recognize the people who would love a hug and went for them first in any situation where he had a choice.

Jango shuddered. She hated hugging and touching. She felt it was degrading to throw yourself at anyone you came across. Sawyer laughed at that. He didn't mind if a few people looked down on him for

a hug or a kiss. There were worse things in the world than a little innocent love, and he'd be sorry if he held back who he was because of what people thought.

Jango wasn't against feelings, or love, just against their overexpression. She felt it was less than genuine. You should only give a kiss or a hug if you really meant it. Otherwise it became worthless.

Sawyer, surprisingly, didn't disagree. He supposed he meant it more often than Jango.

Jango grunted at this.



## 16 – Petaluma

Early one morning, Jango was sitting by the pond, thinking about her caseload and pondering a few leads when a big man in a big red shirt startled her. She yelled in surprise and the man apologized. He then set about using some strange tools and test tubes to examine the water.

He was some sort of scientist who visited the pond regularly to study it and make sure it wasn't infected or spreading disease. Jango immediately thought this might help them with the Grey Man. She decided to befriend the scientist and build a relationship of trust. He seemed nice enough and didn't mind her questions as she followed him around on her rounds. Before she could really build up a rapport, though, he left and was on his way.

Later that day, Jango drove up to Petaluma to meet Eileen for lunch. Sawyer got the afternoon off work and met Jango behind the In-N-Out Burger near the highway.

Sawyer didn't like the meeting place. It opened on a wide, empty field that reminded him of his Merced days. But Jango knew they could meet some former members of the Coyotes here to gather info on another group Jango had been after for quite a while—the Double Ys.

Jango first encountered the Double Ys in San Francisco. They were a small group of loud individuals who ran a smuggling racket, posing as prim and proper sycophants of the wealthy. They used their connections, influence and wealth to run their ring.

The Double Ys operated on a global scale. They had huge operations in Los Angeles and Paris and Jango had done battle with some of their higher-ups during her Agency days. Recently they had been operating in large numbers along Highway 101 in Marin and Sonoma counties. Jango had been contracted to investigate what they were up to. Likely something like smuggling knock-off Louis Vuitton bags. The job was to discover what it was they were smuggling.

Jango briefed Sawyer and set up the meeting.

They waited a long time and Sawyer started to make noises about heading back to work.

Jango reminded him he'd asked for the afternoon off, so if he went back now, it would be more suspicious than if they stayed. She

promised after the meet they could grab a burger and relax. Sawyer liked the idea of a burger. He wasn't as food-obsessed as Jango, but he never passed up a meal if it was offered.

Finally a figure approached from out of the tall brown grass, swaying in the wind. It was Bonesy, former chief of the Coyotes. He had equitable dealings with Jango in his leadership days, but he had, eventually, like most leaders, been forced out. Now he kept to himself in exile up north and engaged in some low-level operations. He wasn't all that active, but he kept his ear to the ground.

Bonesy slinked up and stared at Jango, waiting for her to speak first. It was his way of asserting superiority somehow. Jango waited an appropriate amount of time so she didn't appear to be giving in too easy, and then began asking a few questions about the Double Ys.

Bonesy knew of the Double Ys and he confirmed they had moved into Sonoma County recently with an active but small population. There had always been a few of them around, of course, living under cover stories. Lately Bonesy had seen unfamiliar Double Ys, non-locals, sneaking around at night, hauling bundles here and there. He had no more info than that.

Jango pressed him for more. Did he know of an area they operated in more often than not? Was there a destination for the bundles? Did they have a headquarters?

Sawyer popped in and asked if they talked more in one place than another.

Jango glared at him. She thought this was one of the stupidest questions he could have asked. Double Ys were known for non-stop talking, so why would this mean anything, even if Bonesy had an answer for such a ridiculous question.

But it turned out to be the only question Bonesy answered.

He indicated a baseball field, right down the street from Sawyer's job. They gathered there for big conversations every night around one in the morning. There were no bundles present but lots of talk. He found it odd.

Jango thanked him and, after Bonesy left, Sawyer made her apologize for glaring.

Sawyer found a reason to stay overnight at work. It wasn't all that unusual. During big projects, certain project managers slept on a cot in the front room. They usually took a few extra days off in

compensation. Sawyer happened to be in the middle of a project that let him justify the extra time. Of course he wouldn't be able to sleep at all if he wanted to make any progress on the project. Instead of sleeping he sneaked down the road to the baseball field to spy on the Double Ys.

At around 12:30 AM Sawyer stopped work and walked down to the field. He didn't see anyone around, so he parked himself in some hedges at the edge of the outfield. He must have dozed off because he woke up to the yapping sound of a conversation being held by about 20 or so Double Ys.

They were all talking at once, so it was hard to tell what it was about, but the gist of it, was that "the operation" was nearing completion and the "enemy" would be shown. Amongst this odd rhetoric, Sawyer pulled out a few key phrases like fertilizer, pipe and placement.

The Double Ys were making a bomb.

When he got home the next day he told Jango everything he thought he heard. Jango could barely believe it. Despite Sawyer's exhortations, she didn't report it. Maybe she craved a little of that old Agency glory but she suggested they go back to the field the next night and follow some of the Double Ys from the meeting.

Sawyer thought Jango was crazy. This was an immense gang of apparently non-threatening individuals who were talking about bombs. When people talked about bombs, you called in bomb experts and police. You did not try to follow the bomb people and risk getting yourself blown up.

Sawyer remembered the In-N-Out burger Jango promised him if he went along with the plan.

He reluctantly agreed.

Jango also told him he could hug some Double Ys.

Sawyer told Jango to shove it.

The next night, Jango and Sawyer staked out the field and watched as the Double Ys met and began their cacophonous conversation. Jango, who had more training at surveillance, pulled a bit more info out of the noise.

It seemed the Double Ys were planning to move against something they called "the Bigs." Jango couldn't quite figure out what the Bigs were, but the Double Ys were planning to strike against them all around the world, and Petaluma, for some odd reason, was the place

they would begin. Maybe it was a test case or trial; Jango couldn't quite tell. They were all assembling several pipe bombs for the next night.

Jango gave Sawyer a look. Bombs. Tonight.

Sawyer rolled his eyes. Yes, if they hadn't come back tonight they might not have had a chance to stop the Double Ys. But it also meant that they would have to figure out how to stop the Double Ys *tonight*. They argued a bit about which Double Y was the most likely to lead them to the main bomb factory. It sounded like all the bombs were being assembled in one location. Suddenly Jango shushed Sawyer.

One of the Double Ys had got the others to calm down and was delivering instructions on where the bombs would be delivered. There were only four of them. The Double Y didn't say where the bombs were kept but did say the last of the bombs would be done that night. Now Jango and Sawyer just needed to wait for the gathering to break up. That took forever. After the bombing assignments came more rhetoric against the Bigs and how their great injustice would be righted. They ended things with a loud, social hour.

Finally, the group drifted apart. The Double Y leader gave the two bomb assemblers a pep talk and left. The two assemblers waited for everyone else to leave before they took off. It was difficult to follow them without being seen. Several times Jango had to stop Sawyer from giving them away. He just didn't have Jango's instinct for stealth.

Eventually they ended up in downtown Petaluma in a garden behind a small house that had been converted into an office. The bomb assemblers went into a shed in the backyard. There were no windows and only the one door. Jango and Sawyer couldn't do much spying from outside. They decided to march right in, hoping the surprised Double Ys would not detonate the bombs.

While they didn't try to be especially quiet when they entered, they also didn't crash in with excessive noise. The two bomb assemblers didn't notice at first. Both of them were bent over their work. Three completed bombs sat in a shopping cart, stacked carelessly. Jango hoped there wouldn't be too much of a fight. The bombs didn't look too stable.

Sawyer finally got tired of waiting for them to notice and yelled at them.

The two bomb assemblers dropped their tools and turned around. One of them identified Jango as one of the Bigs and charged. Jango dug in to take the blow but Sawyer sideswiped the charging Double Y and knocked her out cold. The other one more wisely held

her distance but picked up a saw she had been using to make the pipe bomb and waved it threateningly.

Sawyer began to move in but Jango told him to stop.

Instead, Jango walked calmly around to the shopping cart and began to roll it toward the door. This confused and incensed the Double Y who kept calling Jango “a filthy Big” and shouted repeatedly for her to stop. Finally the Y charged at her. Jango deftly moved out of the way, grabbing the saw and tripping the Double Y who knocked herself out cold on the ground when she fell.

Jango placed the saw up on a shelf and began to inspect the partially assembled bomb. It turned out to be very poorly made. In fact, they had the wrong kind of fertilizer. They had bought natural fertilizer and were packing it randomly in steel tubes.

Jango looked at the finished bombs and saw, with some amusement, that the “bombs” had plastic tops from poster tubes on the ends with a little bit of cotton left hanging out as a wick. These weren’t bombs at all. They weren’t even a decent craft project. The Double Ys were entirely incompetent at bomb making.

Sawyer decided they should just disassemble the bombs as discouragement and then go. Jango agreed and said she would report to the Agency that the Double Ys were currently harmless but should be watched in case they got better at it.

Once Sawyer finished emptying the tubes out, he put the four tubes into a trashcan and tossed the plastic lids into recycling.

Jango said the metal tubes were recyclable too, but Sawyer thought they weren’t the right kind of metal.

Once everything had been cleared away, they attempted to revive one of the Double Ys. The first one that Sawyer had sideswiped came to first, so they left him with a message. Sawyer delivered it since the Double Y didn’t seem as afraid of him and didn’t call him a Big, which was all he would say to Jango.

Sawyer explained that the bombs had been destroyed and that they should not pursue bomb making anymore. If they had problems with the Bigs, whoever they were, they should take them up with the police. He tried to explain that Jango wasn’t a Big but the Double Y refused to listen to that. Finally he gave them the number for Jango’s Investigative Services and offered to help them with any investigative work they might need, as long as it didn’t involve explosives. Then they left.

Jango guessed it wasn’t the last they’d hear of the Double Ys.

## 17 – San Rafael

When they got home, Jango didn't go right to bed. She stayed up and ate. Jango loved to eat. Any time, day or night, as long as her stomach wasn't acting up, she could eat. Sawyer liked to eat too, but not as incessantly and never with as much passion. Jango ate anything but preferred meats and cheeses. That night she feasted on liver, not your normal evening meal. Sawyer had a few bites. Jango had a few bowls.

They regularly enjoyed bountiful meals of beef, duck, rice, fish and chicken. Wow, did Jango love chicken. She prepared it in as many ways as possible. Sawyer found it more than a little disgusting how Jango would drool as she waited for a meal to be prepared. And Jango was protective of her food. She never shared.

One time Sawyer jokingly tried to steal a bite of duck from Jango's dinner. She almost tore out Sawyer's throat. She got so upset at Sawyer that she stomped off into the other room without finishing. Not eating was one of the ways to tell if Jango was angry. If she stopped eating, you knew she was either having one of her Agency-related stomach issues, or she was very angry.

Sawyer used her love of food to his advantage. When he wanted to persuade Jango of something, he always offered to make some of her favorite dishes, or let's be honest, *any* dish.

Sawyer used a particularly delicious plate of beef meatballs to get her to agree to let him go out after the Grey Man alone. He had the idea that if he stalked around the pond at night he might catch the Grey Man unaware. While Sawyer wasn't as stealthy as Jango, he was smaller and blended into the shrubbery better. Jango was dead set against it until Sawyer offered to make Jango the meatballs and leave her alone to eat them while he stalked the Grey Man alone.

Jango, visibly salivating, finally agreed on two conditions. She got all the meatballs, and Sawyer only tried his theory for one night. He would also signal her if he got into trouble. The pond wasn't far from the office. Jango insisted on eating at the office so Sawyer could shout for help. Jango argued, against her more hungry instincts, that there was no reason to believe the Grey Man would be there, but Sawyer had a gut feeling that he would get something out of the attempt.

Sawyer began the night excited and hopeful. He jumped at every gust of wind and rustle of leaves. He desperately wanted to leave his hiding place and pace around the pond looking for traces of the Grey Man. But he had found a good spot and hid behind a palm tree in a dark corner. Even with the moonlight, it kept him well hidden.

As the night wore on, Sawyer's eyes drooped. He tried every trick he knew to stay awake, but his excitement had worn off. Eventually he heard a bird singing and realized he had fallen asleep. It was dawn. He had seen no sign of the Grey Man. If he came, Sawyer slept through it. He dragged himself out of his hiding place, leaves clinging to him all over and trudged around the pond and headed back to the office.

When he got back, he was surprised to find Jango still there. She asked him if he had seen the Grey Man. He just shook his head. Then she asked how Sawyer could have missed him.

Jango saw the Grey Man run past the office toward the pond early in the evening. Sawyer wasn't sure how that was possible. He had been very awake at the time and hadn't seen a thing.

Sawyer thought maybe Jango was teasing him until he saw the footprints. They had been tracking the man long enough to recognize them.

They both smiled wondering if this would lead them to new clues, or perhaps even the Grey Man's hideout. They ran down the path to the pond where Sawyer figured out why he missed the man. The tracks went directly opposite from the place Sawyer had hidden. They barely came close to the pond before veering away from it to the west. Sawyer and Jango followed the tracks. They ended at a fence with a tall, grey wooden gate that was locked.

It looked as if the Grey Man's footprints went right under the gate. It either was unlocked last night, or the Grey Man had the key. On the other side of the gate was a garden with a walnut tree, an apple tree and some ground plants. They couldn't see much else through the cracks in the fence. They thought about climbing over, but it was too tall. They didn't want to damage the property. The fence went a short way down and connected to a house. Jango noted the house number for further investigation, and they went back to the office.

## 18 – San Rafael

As a former athlete, Jango liked to play all kinds of games. One weekend, she invited Eileen and Tom over for some backyard soccer. With only four people, it wasn't real soccer, but it was still fun. Jango played an excellent goalie, so much so that it often became three on one with everyone trying to score off her. Sawyer was fast and agile and played an intense forward. Tom and Eileen filled in the gaps.

They all had so much fun that they decided to make it a regular thing. When they could get time, usually on weekends, Tom and Eileen would get the ball, come over and play for as long as they could. Eventually Jango got the idea that they should try to form up as a team to play four on four.

A park across the highway near the Civic Center had a field where people played pickup games. They showed up one weekend and found a team to play. Jango, Sawyer, Tom and Eileen were much better in their own backyards than they were in the park. They got slaughtered. Jango's goaltending was still stellar, but not enough for a shutout, which is what they would have needed for a tie. Sawyer was a bit of a ball hog and couldn't shoot well. Tom and Eileen admitted they hadn't been working on their skills.

The game ended because of the skunk rule and the team slinked off the field. When they got home, Jango tried to explain what they had done wrong but Sawyer refused to listen, and Tom and Eileen just seemed bored. Jango gave up and went to take a nap. That was the end of their dreams of competitive team soccer. Though they still played casually on the weekends among themselves, Jango's heart didn't seem to be as into it. Sawyer began to score a lot off Jango. Nobody had the heart to tell him he wasn't getting better, nor that, in fact, he might be getting worse. All his scoring got Jango's competitive spirit back and she began to block more. Then she began to take the ball and score at the other end. That wasn't technically legal the way she did it. Then they realized that it was much more fun to play with almost no rules with your friends than it was to force yourself to be good at something. Jango had more fun in the casual soccer games than she had ever had before.



## 19 – Switzerland

One evening while Jango and Sawyer worked late at the office, a strange smell came from the nearby pond. It was sharp and tangy, not the usual murky smell of still water and plants. It smelled like familiar danger to Jango. It drove her crazy. She ran around, muttering to herself, racking her brain to figure out what it was.

Sawyer tried to settle her down but nothing he did helped.

She ran to the window, muttered some things, ran back inside, ran to the door, muttered some more and ran back inside, then repeated the whole process again. She ignored everything Sawyer said to her.

Finally he asked her about dinner. That got her attention.

They ate in silence. Afterward, Jango relaxed, so Sawyer tried asking Jango what had worried her.

She sighed and said it was nothing, but Sawyer persisted.

Finally she admitted the smell brought back memories of a mission that had gone bad. She had lost someone on that mission, and she didn't like to think about it. The smell was so strong, it forced her to relive it.

The mission had been in the mountains of Switzerland, one of her most dangerous assignments. She holed up with her contact, Greta, in a small mountain cottage to keep watch on a suspected band of terrorists operating a hidden training center.

Greta was Jango's mentor. She was big and tough and nothing ever worried her. Unlike Jango, Greta never got into moods where she fretted about anything. She took charge and she didn't suffer fools lightly. If you crossed her, you heard about it fast, but she wasn't in your face or obnoxious the rest of the time. Mostly she was quiet and regal. Jango always tried to emulate her.

While observing the terrorists, Jango noticed a little girl among them. That was odd. Terrorists rarely used children and certainly didn't keep children around who weren't working. The girl just seemed to be carried from place to place, not contributing anything. Greta decided to get a closer look and sneaked down the mountain to observe. Jango watched with binoculars from their small cabin.

She got to the back door of the hideout right as the group carried the girl outside. Greta was quick though, and got under the porch just before she got caught. The group got into a van and drove off. Greta didn't come out from under the porch. Jango knew Greta wouldn't be worried yet, so she ignored her anxiety. Finally, Greta came out from under the porch limping. Jango tore down the hill to help her.

Greta criticized her for risking their cover, but the group was gone and Greta obviously needed help. She'd sliced her foot on something sharp when hiding under the porch. Jango promised to see to it when they got back to the cabin.

The wound was a gaping mess of blood and dirt. Jango cleaned it as best she could but it needed serious medical attention. Greta refused to abandon the mission. The little girl had been handcuffed and must be a hostage. They needed to gather more intel and call in a raid.

Jango felt they had enough intel and should call in the raid now so they could get Greta to a hospital.

Greta shook her head. She knew HQ would want more verification. She'd learned long ago to get all the observations and verifications you need before calling in a report if you wanted swift, effective action.

With that, Jango agreed to go down and get additional forensic evidence.

Jango's legs shook as she moved down to the terrorist's place. She went through the door and found the house still empty. Her heartbeat slowed from a pounding hammer to a light drumming. In one room, she found a child's bed with a few toys and bedclothes. It looked like the girl spent most of her time there. Some crayon drawings hung on the wall, though they didn't seem particularly significant.

The other bedrooms had beds and little else. Everything worth noting was in the main room. A large table sat in the middle, covered with pages and pages of schematics. The terrorists were planning some kind of intrusion or bombing. This wasn't an assembly operation, though; there was no sign of chemicals. If bombs were involved, they wouldn't be coming from the house. Jango took pictures of all the plans and the several pages of lists that included supplies and names. Near the table was a sink area with pots and pans. The refrigerator contained normal food you'd see in a mountain retreat; eggs, sauces, some open, partially-eaten canned food.

In the corner by the couch was an armory. Most of the weapons had probably been taken when the group left, but a couple rifles, an AK-

47 and some kind of miniature cannon were stacked in the corner. Aside from that, nothing notable existed. She saw no sign of who the girl was. The schematics were not identifiable as being for any operation in particular, at least not one that Jango had been briefed on. She made extra sure she had pictures of everything worth taking pictures of and then left.

When she went back outside, she smelled barbecue. As she walked back toward the cottage, the smell got stronger. She rounded a turn in the road and saw why. The cottage she and Greta were staying in was on fire. Jango sprinted the rest of the way back to check on Greta. The flames were licking around one corner of the house but hadn't started to rage yet. Jango knew you didn't go into a burning building. It was an unacceptable risk. You couldn't help anyone if you were dead. She did it anyway.

The smoke was bad inside and smoke alarms blared. Greta lay on the couch unmoving. Jango tried to wake her but only got a drowsy response. Greta must have passed out from her injury. That was not a good sign. Jango dragged Greta out of the cottage and the cold air seemed to revive her some. She started to move under her own power.

They began to limp down the hill together, away from the burning cottage and away from the terrorist's building. The men had returned since Greta had gone inside. Likely they had started the fire, thinking both of them were in there. Jango couldn't tell if they had the little girl with them, but the men began shooting so she didn't have time to find out.

Between the cold, the bullets and the difficulty of keeping Greta awake, Jango had no idea how she kept going. She managed to get a secure text out to her handlers. After an interminable struggle in which she was sure every minute that the rifle-toting men would catch up with her, she heard a car. Howard and a couple locals showed up in a Jeep. The gunmen scattered. Another Jeep arrived behind Howard's and plowed past them up the hill. Jango heard more gunfire in the distance but ignored it. She concentrated on getting Greta safely into the Jeep.

As they rode to the hospital, Greta recovered a little and smiled at Jango. She told Jango how proud of her she was, and how she shouldn't be sad. Greta was happy and satisfied with a productive and well-lived life. Jango told her stop talking that way but Greta had always been a realist. In any case, she knew her field days were done and she was officially passing the torch to Jango. Someday Jango would do that herself, and Greta wanted her to know how it was done. It was the last

lesson. Greta told Jango she had what it took. She just needed to trust her instincts.

Jango cried and told Greta how much she loved her. Jango could see Howard silently tearing up. They got to the hospital and the doctors shuttled Greta out of sight.

Howard and Jango drove silently to the airport and flew home. After a nap on the plane, they landed and debriefed. Howard took a few moments to check email and gather intelligence reports. He passed along that the little girl had been rescued and all but one of the terrorists had been captured or killed. One terrorist got away but had little chance of surviving in the mountains, especially because he had stripped off his coat and pants before getting away on skis.

Howard looked like he was about to say more, then stopped. Greta. Jango knew. She sighed and Howard finally finished.

“Greta had smoke inhalation and severe internal bleeding in addition to multiple surface injuries. She must have been hurt more than she let on by something under that porch. She’s... she’s inactive,” was all Howard could manage. He just shook his head.

Jango sobbed and slunk off to be alone. She slept for 15 hours. She would never forget the stern, loving, wise lessons she learned at Greta’s feet.

From then on, whenever Jango smelled distant burning grills, barbecues or bonfires she tended to freak out a little, even before she realized what it was. It haunted her the rest of her life.

## 20 – San Rafael

Sawyer got up early one day for a morning run. He and Tom and went on their usual trek through the neighborhood and up the hill. As usual, they stopped at the top to take in the view. While Tom looked off toward the neighborhood, Sawyer noticed a dark, slinking shape hiding in the trees at the bottom of the valley. All his alarms went off. He needed to get down there.

After a moment's consideration, Sawyer decided not to involve Tom, so he finished the run. When he got back home, he quietly sneaked inside so as not to wake Jango and changed into something stealthy. Then he sneaked back out.

After what felt like far too long, Sawyer made it back to a position where he could see down into the valley. Nothing was there anymore, but he could see where it had been. And it looked easy enough to get down there and take a closer look.

It wasn't. The smooth slope turned out to be full of weeds, brambles and hidden ditches. After fighting his way through, he came out on the valley floor covered in burs, seeds and dirt. He found a depression in the ground where he had seen the slinking shape. It must have lay there for quite a while. Was it hiding? Sleeping? He thought he could make out a trail leading off from the hollow. He knew he should go back and tell Jango, but he was too excited. He told himself he would just follow the trail for a while to see where it went and then head back and tell Jango.

The trail led him to a dark copse of trees. Sawyer knew the Coyotes sometimes used these groups of trees as hideouts, but there had been no sign of the gang since they agreed to leave. Sawyer followed the trail deep into the heart of the trees. It was dark, but not so dark he couldn't see. He had pretty good night vision anyway. He found old gang signs but it was obvious nobody had been in the trees for a while. The trail continued through the rubble into a darker corner where the trees were thick. Sawyer's heart beat harder. He absolutely should turn around and go tell Jango at once. But once he left, he knew whatever it was would take off and not come back to this hideout for a long time, if ever. Sawyer screwed up his courage and entered the thicket.

It was dark and smelled dry and musty, like dead vegetation left too wet too long. Something moved. Sawyer froze. He could smell something else now, wet and dank like fur after a swim in the pond. He moved in close and made his presence known.

He was answered with a quiet snuffling. A small, thin voice asked if Sawyer was going to kill him. Sawyer said he would not. His heart beat very fast now. Had he caught the Grey Man? Was this his secret lair? He demanded to know who was there. He demanded that they come out.

A small fat fellow eased himself out of the corner. He had beady eyes and a small, tight mouth. He looked up pleadingly at Sawyer, asking not to be killed.

Exasperated, Sawyer promised not to kill the fellow. He asked what the Fat Man had been doing slinking along in the dark.

The Fat Man explained that he lived in the hills. He liked to scrounge around to see what he could find that was useful. He talked with relish about the things he found in the remains of the Coyotes' camp, most of which were half-eaten or half-spoiled food items.

Sawyer sighed. The Fat Man was a homeless scavenger. He wasn't the best element to have in a neighborhood, sure, but he didn't really cause any harm. His only crime was being seen by Sawyer. Then Sawyer realized that if the Fat Man spent a lot of time scrounging around in the hills, he might know a lot about the Grey Man. He might know a lot about a lot of things. Someone like the Fat Man could be a valuable ally in gathering evidence.

He asked if the Fat Man would be willing to help with some investigations.

The Fat Man grimaced and looked toward the sky to think. After a minute, he only grimaced more. Clearly, he didn't know what Sawyer meant, and in all honesty, he didn't seem very bright. So Sawyer explained that he and his partner investigated mysteries and crimes, and they needed help gathering information. Since the Fat Man was always prowling the hills out of sight, Sawyer imagined he must see a lot of what goes on.

The Fat Man admitted this was true, proving he wasn't too dumb after all, but naturally, he wanted to know what was in it for him.

Sawyer asked him what he wanted.

String.

Sawyer's surprise was apparent.

So the Fat Man explained that string was very difficult to get since it degraded fast. The Fat Man had several hideouts like this in which he stored stuff. He never had enough string to make his bundles. If Sawyer could supply the Fat Man with unlimited string he would consider himself the luckiest fellow in the world.

Readily, Sawyer agreed.

Before he let the Fat Man go, Sawyer decided to ask him one more question to see if he was worth all the string. Did he know anything about the Grey Man?

At first, the Fat Man didn't know what Sawyer was talking about. Sawyer explained about the Grey Man's appearance, his furtive ventures by the pond and some of his nefarious activities they had been contracted to investigate.

The Fat Man thought about it, which looked painful. He knew nothing about the nefarious activities, but he thought he might know who this Grey Man was. Sawyer leaned in with interest. The Fat Man explained that he didn't see this so-called Grey Man much. He seemed to stick to the neighborhood proper while the Fat Man himself stuck to the hills. But every so often, the Grey Man came up in the hills looking for natural foods that grew there. This Grey Man was especially concerned with finding things like walnuts and avocados. The Fat Man remembered seeing him most around the ripening time for those two foods. He might come other times, but the Fat Man couldn't say for sure.

Sawyer could not wait to tell Jango. The Fat Man may have given them the break they needed. Jango would be overjoyed. All they had to do was stake out a walnut or avocado tree near harvest time, sit and watch for the Grey Man.

Sawyer thanked the Fat Man and started to leave but then remembered they hadn't set up a protocol for meeting. Jango drilled into Sawyer the importance of setting up the protocol for meetings, drops and other communications.

The Fat Man said he didn't really want to share his hideouts with anyone else—nothing personal—so maybe they should just use this one as their meeting point.

Sawyer agreed and they decided to leave a piece of white rag up in one of the thicket's exterior branches to request a meeting. The other party would indicate acceptance by moving the rag to the other side of the thicket.

The Fat Man suggested dusk as their meeting time. He liked to nap during the day and this morning he was already well past his naptime.

In full agreement, Sawyer nodded and wished the Fat Man well.

When Sawyer got back to the office he was bursting to give Jango the news, but she wasn't there. He decided to wait and called in sick to his Petaluma job. He watched some TV, played some games, then walked down by the pond and sat for a while. Finally he went back to the office, plopped down on the couch and fell asleep.

He woke to a slamming door. It was dark out. He'd slept the whole afternoon.

Jango stormed in angry, demanding to know where Sawyer had been. Sawyer said he went on an early run and discovered something fantastic.

Jango asked why he thought it was fantastic.

Sawyer told him about the Fat Man, how he had looked suspicious, how he had carefully tracked him and how he thought of the idea of milking him for information. He was just getting to the part about the information on the Grey Man when Jango interrupted him.

Why would he spend so much time speaking with an associate of the Grey Man, she wanted to know. How could he possibly have justified spilling so much information about their practice to an associate of a suspect that was under the strictest surveillance?

Sawyer didn't know what she meant. Why did Jango think the Fat Man was an associate of the Grey Man? Why would he agree to help Sawyer if the Fat Man was a criminal? Wouldn't he have run?

Jango pointed out that the Fat Man had run and Sawyer had cornered him. Because of Sawyer's overenthusiastic response, the Fat Man came up with a story to save his life, and Sawyer's apparent ignorance gave the Fat Man just what he needed.

There was no way he could have known the Fat Man worked with the Grey Man, Sawyer complained.

Jango barked back that he definitely would have known if he had done the research Jango had asked him to do. She pointed at some files on the office table. Sawyer had been meaning to read them and—to keep Jango from nagging him—he had told her he had. Now he pawed through them with fervor. They described several known associates of



the Grey Man, identified during interviews Jango conducted with area citizens. One of the known associates fit the description of the Fat Man.

Slowly, Sawyer looked up from the papers at Jango. She was furious.

Though it wasn't a good defense, Sawyer spat back that Jango had been gone all day, so where had she been?

Jango said that one of her long and trusted informants had alerted her that Sawyer was up in the hills pursuing something. Jango had gone charging into the hills to give backup. By the time she got there and properly scouted the situation, both Sawyer and the Fat Man were gone. Jango assumed that Sawyer had been hurt or abducted or worse so she tracked the Fat Man all the way to his main hideout where she heard him laughing about his meeting with Sawyer. Jango got the whole story by listening as he talked to another of Grey Man's associates known only as Cat. They were both thrilled at the idea of leading the detectives on with ridiculous information about avocados and walnuts and at how Sawyer had bought the idea that all the Fat Man would want was string. Jango said they got an especially good laugh out of this.

Sawyer hung his head. He knew he should have gone to get Jango, but he lost his head. It wasn't quite the red zone, but it certainly was a loss of judgment. He had blown their cover. Not that the Grey Man didn't know who they were, but Sawyer had given away the majority of what they knew.

Jango could see how sad Sawyer was about this mistake and let up. Now they actually did have some leverage, she pointed out. The Grey Man and his associates would likely underestimate Sawyer now. He should keep meeting with the Fat Man and continue to let him think they believed his info.

Sawyer didn't like the idea of continuing to play the fool, but Jango explained that it would give them an advantage since the Fat Man would assume that neither one of them knew who he really was. He would slip up more that way.

Sawyer nodded his head and agreed to pay this price for his mistake.

That was something Jango liked about Sawyer. He may be hotheaded and sometimes foolish, but once he understood he had done wrong, he was always remorseful and eager to make it up.

With the team reunited, the two detectives put their heads together and hatched a plan. Sawyer would drop false hints about the progress of the investigations that would lead the Fat Man to think they

were far from understanding what was really going on. Then they would pay strict attention to what the Fat Man's reactions were and prompt him to give up crucial information by mistake. Jango thought they would eventually hit on a way to scare the Fat Man into warning the Grey Man. When that happened, they would follow the Fat Man and hopefully bust the whole gang.

## 21 – San Rafael

Jango decided they should focus on other cases so the Grey Man wouldn't suspect their plan. She prioritized a case they could easily crack. A woman named Mary reported hearing her front gate open several times an evening, but whenever she turned on the lights and looked, she found nothing. Bells on the gates rang whenever someone opened it. For a long time she thought it was the wind, but it happened on a night when there wasn't any wind, and she had made sure to lock the gate to prevent it from swinging open on its own.

Mary had been bugging Jango to come out and investigate. Jango assumed it was probably a cat or rat or some such thing, given its erratic nature. Jango had put her off with these explanations for a while, hoping that maybe the cause would reveal itself or go away. It hadn't, so it made a perfect cover case for them to knock out while they pretended to ignore the Grey Man.

They arrived at Mary's house and tried to talk to her. It was almost like they were speaking different languages but eventually they got the basic info they needed. Mary let them stay and watch the door that night. Unfortunately, nothing happened. Rather than waste time coming every night, they asked Mary to let them know the next time she heard noises and they would get over to her house as fast as possible. The noises usually happened several times a night, she told them, when they happened at all.

Two nights later they found themselves at Mary's again. She had heard the tinkle of the bells twice. Jango was about to ask her a question when they all heard it. Sawyer leaped into action and was outside and at the gate in a flash with Jango on his tail. He got there fast enough to see the bells still swinging.

Sawyer looked for evidence of what jostled the bells. Jango moved off along the fence looking in the undergrowth on both sides of the gate. Sawyer turned up a tuft of hair. It was grey and matted. For a brief moment, Sawyer thought maybe it was the Grey Man's, but the hair was too thick. They walked slowly down the fence looking for more clues. They found a loose board in the fence and crossed to the other side to search along the ground there. Jango saw her first.

She was short with dark, possibly grey, hair, though it was hard to see. Her eyes glowed red with fear. She had been heading back to the gate thinking that Jango and Sawyer were on the other side of the fence. Sawyer charged at her and, as usual when Sawyer did this, Jango became annoyed. She always took a more conservative approach so as not to spook her quarry. But even she had to admit that there was a classic Agency attack maneuver that used a hard-charging start like this, so she decided to go with it. It worked this time because of the fence.

As Sawyer charged at the dark woman, she had two options. She could run backward and try to outdistance him. She might have been faster, but it didn't look like it. Or she could turn left away from Sawyer and run along the fence. To guard against both moves, Jango broke wide around to her left and swept back to cut her off. It worked perfectly. The woman was focused on Sawyer and Jango disappeared from her peripheral vision, so she took off to the left away from Sawyer, hoping to find shelter in some bushes. When she got near the bushes, Jango seemed to come out of nowhere, startling her into reversing her direction. When she did, she ran right into Sawyer.

She squealed but Sawyer had her and Jango moved in to make sure she couldn't get away. After they all caught their breath, Jango started questioning her. The dark woman said her name was Fea. She admitted to sneaking in through the broken plank and ringing the bells. She refused to say why.

They dragged her back through the gate and made her look at the bells. Jango asked her over and over again why she was ringing them then made a move like she would go for Fea's throat. That broke her. She was ringing the bells to scare Mary. It was revenge. Fea was being paid to do it to mess with Mary's mind.

Jango pressed Fea to find out who had ordered her to do this, but she clammed up. Sawyer asked if it was the Grey Man. Jango wanted him to shut up, but you could tell from Fea's eyes that she knew the Grey Man and it probably was him. She said nothing. No matter how aggressive Jango appeared, they couldn't get any more out of Fea other than some apologies. Jango gave up, but forced Fea to apologize to Mary directly.

Mary asked her why she did it, but Fea said nothing.

Jango knew they were skating close to unlawful imprisonment so they let Fea go.

Mary thanked Jango and Sawyer for solving the case.

Jango said it was their pleasure. Then she asked Mary if she could think of anyone who would want to scare her like that.

It must have been someone who knew she was jumpy at night, but she couldn't think of who that might be. Mary couldn't think of a thing she'd done that was controversial so she really had no idea.

Jango and Sawyer said their goodbyes and went back to their office to finish some paperwork before they went home.

Later that evening over a snack, Jango unraveled the logic of the case. It had to be the Grey Man. The Coyotes and the Bandit were the only others with the motivation and capability to scare Fea into cooperation. It wasn't likely that the Coyotes would organize something like this so soon after agreeing to move off. The Bandit was out of the picture, and frankly, really not that fearsome. That left the Grey Man. What had Mary done to upset the Grey Man so much that he would hire a fake ghost? Why not be more direct? Why play with her mind?

Sawyer wondered whether they could use this with the Fat Man. Maybe Sawyer should let drop that they caught Fea and she wouldn't talk. He could ask the Fat Man if he knew anything about it, even if it wasn't related to the Grey Man.

Jango shook her head. That would let the Fat Man know they suspected more about the Grey Man than they should reveal. Plus, they would probably take it out on Fea. She didn't see any reason to push the dark woman into further trouble.

Instead, Jango suggested that Sawyer tell the Fat Man about catching Fea and brag about how they solved it. Case closed. Just say that the little evil dark woman had been terrorizing poor Mary and they had stopped it. Really play up how proud he felt to have solved the case. Then watch the Fat Man's reaction. He'd have some sort of reaction, and anything he said, even silence, would tell them something.

## 22 – San Rafael

It was a week before the Fat Man wanted to talk. Sawyer met him that night. Fea was with the Fat Man. That threw a wrench in the plan. He had asked for this meeting, and now he couldn't say what he'd planned to say. Sawyer was going to have to think on his feet and he knew it—and that's what got him in trouble in the first place.

Mercifully, the Fat Man started talking first and explained that Fea told him what happened at Mary's house.

Sawyer wanted to know exactly what Fea had told the Fat Man.

The Fat Man said she simply explained how Jango and Sawyer stopped her from taking revenge on Mary. Sawyer thought one of three things was going on. One, Fea had told the Fat Man everything and was testing Sawyer. Two, Fea was worried Sawyer would tell the Fat Man the truth and had finagled being at this meeting in order to make sure he didn't. The third possibility was that Fea didn't know the Fat Man worked for the Grey Man and this was just a weird coincidence. This last seemed the least likely.

Then Sawyer thought of a fourth possibility.

Sawyer told the Fat Man they suspected Fea worked for the Grey Man. He said they suspected the Grey Man forced Fea into it. This ruined Jango's tactic of trying to keep the Fat Man from knowing the details, but at the same time it pulled the rug out of the idea that Sawyer would hide something from the Fat Man. Even if Fea had told the Fat Man everything, it would look like Sawyer was just trying to protect her. Sawyer wasn't going to let anything make it look like he didn't trust the Fat Man.

The Fat Man chuckled his words as he explained that he liked Fea but he couldn't see her ever working for the Grey Man. He could understand why Sawyer might think that, but he should trust his source. The Grey Man had nothing to do with Fea. Fea gave a little smirk from behind the Fat Man. Now Sawyer thought he understood. The Fat Man did not know Fea had been in league with the Grey Man. Fea was under orders to keep the Fat Man in the dark. She showed up to ensure that he stayed in the dark one way or another.

Sawyer could get behind this but he had a few questions of his own. How did Fea and the Fat Man know each other? It was a natural follow up from somebody who suspected the Grey Man's hand. Besides,

it would be more suspicious never to ask the Fat Man to prove his claims.

The Fat Man laughed. Fea was an old friend of his. They met years ago hiking in the hills. She came looking for help after she got busted at Mary's, and he put two and two together and figured out that Sawyer was one of the detectives who caught her. So, he said, he agreed to help her. She just wanted him to make a few requests, and in return she was willing to do some reconnaissance work on the Grey Man.

Sawyer thought that was interesting. What was the Fat Man going to put her up to? What if he had her do something that conflicted with her true responsibilities? What demands would she make of Sawyer that she couldn't make the other night? It was a charade for her, and she knew it was a charade for Sawyer. Somehow he got the impression that the Fat Man thought it was a charade in a different way, but the joke was on him.

The Fat Man explained that Fea wanted amnesty from further investigation, something Sawyer and Jango had already agreed on. He wanted them to abandon any investigations of her connection with any other powers in these parts, be it the Coyotes, the Grey Man or any other group. Again already done. Finally, she wanted a small salary as a consultant for the time that she helped them. This one threw Sawyer, but he suspected maybe it was a negotiating ploy. In other words it gave him something to reject so he didn't look like he was swallowing it whole, which also would have looked suspicious.

Sawyer asked what he would get out of it.

The Fat Man continued to speak for Fea. She would bring daily reports to Sawyer for the next month. He would not need to come up into the hill to meet with the Fat Man, though he still could if he wanted. Fea agreed to carry messages directly to Sawyer. She would do her own investigations. Anything she found in those would be reported directly to Sawyer as well. They could meet in a secure location in the park or wherever Sawyer wanted to set it up. But this way he would get quicker information and possibly greater information.

Sawyer thought about it, then told the Fat Man and Fea that he couldn't possibly agree to it without consulting his partner. He didn't think they would agree to the fee, and he knew Jango would not want to agree to the canceling of any future investigations. Of course this last bit was not true either but Sawyer wanted to give the Fat Man something to object to.

The Fat Man understood and agreed he could come back to discuss it more later.

Then Fea finally spoke up. She acted much shyer than she had the night before. She was quite a bit smaller than the Fat Man and this accentuated her meekness. She stuttered a lot and then said that if Sawyer agreed to the terms now, she would drop the request for a fee. This apparently surprised the Fat Man, probably because he was anticipating taking a cut.

He admonished her under his breath for negotiating from a position of weakness. She had just given away her position, he whispered.

Sawyer could hear all of it and told them both to calm down. He sighed. Then he agreed to the terms without the fee, figuring that somehow he would convince Jango. It wouldn't be easy, but it was better than hearing this bickering. He tried to act as if this agreement was the last thing he wanted to do. The Fat Man seemed to buy it.

The Fat Man said that was all for now, but he might be absent on and off since he had relatives visiting, so if he didn't answer a request in the next month, just deliver any messages to Fea. He would continue to meet when he could. Sawyer thanked them both and left. As he came down from the hill and into the neighborhood, Fea sneaked up beside him, frightening him half to death.

She explained that the whole thing had been her idea, including the scouting. It would give her cover with the Grey Man if she got caught. She also pointed out that running messages from the Fat Man had not been her idea. The Fat Man had come up with this when she was explaining her proposal and she thought it was odd. She got the impression that he wasn't going to be around. The Fat Man told her to meet with him in another farther location near the top of the range of hills. It was very close to one of the Grey Man's normal meeting spots. Sawyer told her if she just told him the spot, then they wouldn't have to wait 30 days.

Fea refused. They would know it was her who told and she couldn't risk it but she could and would provide other safer information. Then she dropped her head and slinked away without saying goodbye.



## 23 – San Rafael

Jango commended Sawyer for his initiative, saying he handled it exactly the way she would have. She regretted having to expose that much of the truth, but she liked how they doused suspicions of the Grey Man while forcing Fea to cover for her real reason to meet with them. Sawyer was relieved. Finally, he had followed his instincts and they'd turned out to be right. He'd waited until Jango walked out of the room briefly to jump for joy, then composed himself again quickly, reminding himself to try and be professional.

Oddly, the job with Mary that they thought would move them onto something *not* involving the Grey Man had brought them deeper in. So now they needed a case that would take them far away from the Grey Man if they really wanted to deflect suspicion. Jango thought she had the case. This one was easy, straightforward, and at the request of the San Rafael Police Department. They were going legit. At first this worried Sawyer. He had a healthy distrust of law enforcement but when Jango explained the case, it sounded like a breeze.

All neighborhoods deal with a certain amount of litter. Lately, Jango and Sawyer's neighborhood of Terra Linda had become a trash heap. Papers, cans and newspapers drifted in piles in all the gutters. The neighborhood was normally a fairly clean place. It was only in the past three weeks or so that the litter began to pile up. It was disgusting.

The SRPD tried to track down the culprits and had busted some kids, but it turned out they were not the cause. The police had spent more time digging into the case than they could afford, so they decided to contract out the investigation. Jango agreed to discover the litterer, build a case and hand it over to the SRPD for arrest.

Both Jango and Sawyer figured this would be a breeze. Theoretically, litterers should be easy to find because they left a trail. It was understandable that the police couldn't catch the person, since it would require more persistence, and man-hours, than they could spare.

Jango and Sawyer had all the time in the world. They could afford to spend all day every day following the trail and staking out locations. They would bust the Trash Man in the act and hand him over to the police. Conveniently, it would fit perfectly with their plans to stay away from the Grey Man.

Sawyer took the first phase: investigating the trash. The problem was the street cleaners. Not that cleaning the streets was a bad thing, but it disrupted the evidence trail. Sawyer needed to find the newest trash to be able to get a good fix on where the Trash Man might be. The street cleaners didn't target the oldest trash first and clean in reverse chronological order. They went, more understandably up and down the streets, sometimes sweeping up old trash, sometimes sweeping up fresh. Still, Sawyer was able to track down the newest bits and work out a pattern.

Most of the trash originated in barrels in Santa Margarita Valley Park. It worked its way from there through almost every street in the neighborhood. Whoever was doing this was doing it unobserved. It was quite impressive. The police interviewed several residents and nobody had seen anyone dropping trash in the quantities that could explain the pile-ups.

Jango took over from there. She picked a day when no street cleaners were out and tracked the history of the trash. It wasn't an exact science, but from what she could tell, the trash piled up over 10 blocks at a go. The Trash Man—or woman—must spend each night doing three or four “rounds” of dropping trash, covering 30-40 blocks. That's why it piled up so fast.

Jango could not discover any motivation for it. It certainly wasn't an accident. The Trash Man seemed to take the garbage out of the trashcans solely for the purpose of dropping it on the street. It took effort to get it out of the bins and a conscious decision to drop it on the streets. The type of trash dropped was just what was in the cans. Jango's search backed up what Sawyer found. The Trash Man started in the park then headed out until he was out of trash.

Jango and Sawyer decided to stake out the Trash Man that night. They would hide in the bushes and follow him until they saw him depositing enough trash that they could swear to the cops he was the culprit. Sawyer arranged to be off work the next day so he could stay up late.

They set out for the park in a party mood. Jango brought snacks. Way too many in Sawyer's opinion, but he knew Jango would never admit that such a thing was possible. They found a comfortable slope that was covered in leaves and pine needles and laid out a blanket. The low branches of the trees hid them well, but they could still see most of the park, and they had a good view of all the trashcans.

Jango laid out the treats and, Sawyer could see, stacked more of them on her side. They began to munch and discuss things quietly as they waited for the last rays of twilight to disappear behind the hills so the embracing dark could welcome the Trash Man to his final day of trash spreading.

## 23 – Oslo, Norway

As they talked quietly to each other, Jango recalled a similar stakeout in the pine forests of Norway, outside Oslo. Near Lake Dausjoen, maybe? She thought so. She and a Canadian associate called “The Biscuit” (or just “Biscuit” for short) were holed up in the forest, waiting for a group of surveyors. The surveyors were suspected of being a cover for a terrorist organization of neo-Nazis. Biscuit and Jango had a bushel of Norwegian snacks, including some pickled fish, loads of white cheeses, and in what Jango thought at the time was a hilarious joke, several packets of McVitie’s biscuits.

They were only supposed to be on the stakeout for half a day, hence the snacks rather than MREs or other serious rations. As day turned into night and the surveyors didn’t come, Biscuit and Jango swapped stories about their training. Biscuit marveled at Jango’s strict regimen. Then the talk moved to lost loves and friends and relatives.

Jango described Eileen and how she always seemed to know exactly what snacks Jango wanted and was always ready with a supportive word, or a hug, or just the willingness to sit in the sun and think. Biscuit mentioned that he had a friend like that named Nicole whom he always relied on when he felt blue. Nicole always knew how to cheer him up somehow. He missed her dearly when he was away on missions. Family was great of course, but both Jango and Biscuit agreed that friendship was the best, most solid, and most valuable relationship you could have. It survived so much and healed so much more.

The dawn broke and both agents realized they had been up all night talking. They agreed to take turns napping through the early morning. Still the surveyors did not arrive. Once the original 12-hour mission hit 24 hours, mission protocol required them to break radio silence and make contact. That’s when chaos broke loose.

Jango and Biscuit had been under surveillance. Somehow the surveyors knew they were coming. Before Jango and Biscuit could contact HQ, the radio took a bullet. They scrambled away, deep into the forest, but now had no way to call for backup.

Biscuit suggested they split up but stay in visual range and try to triangulate the location of the shooter. The shots continued, steadily targeting their former camp. They moved swiftly through the forest signaling to each other and converging. Working together, they closed in fast. They spotted the shooter high up in a tree looking down on Jango

and Biscuit's destroyed camp. Jango thought with sadness of all the cheese left there. It would all look like Swiss now.

There were four surveyors, all up in the tree together. They left equipment on the ground below the tree. Most of it was uninteresting except for the massive bundle of C-4. The surveyor-terrorists must have been off to blow something up.

Using only signals, Biscuit and Jango silently worked out a plan. Jango would move in and get the attention of the shooter and draw fire. Biscuit, the better climber, would scramble up the tree. Jango should be able to get far enough away not to get shot before Biscuit had climbed up and disarmed the shooter. Then Jango could come back and help take the rest of the surveyors into custody. Done quickly enough it wouldn't matter if the others were armed. They would be in Jango and Biscuit's control before they realized what was happening.

Jango ran out of the forest toward the camp and yelled as if in surprise as the first shot rang out. She immediately turned and ran away from the tree, successfully pulling the shooter's attention toward her. Suddenly the shots stopped. Biscuit must have got to the shooter already. He was quick. Then she heard more shots, too many and not at her. She turned and saw all four surveyors shooting at Biscuit. He was lying on the ground with his leg caught in a bear trap that lay in the grass next to the other equipment. She hadn't heard him, but he must have yelped when the trap closed, catching the shooter's attention and causing the other surveyors to draw their weapons.

Thankfully the angle was such that they couldn't get a good bead on Biscuit. That wouldn't protect him forever. Jango did the only thing she could think to do and ran back, yelling for their attention. All this did was cause two of the surveyors to begin to shoot at Jango while the other two kept trying to hit Biscuit. Then, as if in slow motion, Jango saw Biscuit begin to drag himself toward the equipment. It must have been painful with the trap digging into his bleeding legs. She knew immediately what he was doing and began to shout for him to stop. It was too late.

Biscuit set off the C-4 explosives and an immense fireball rose up from the ground, incinerating the tree and the four surveyors—and everything else nearby. Jango cried and ran toward the fireball, but the heat repelled her before she could get very close. Even so, it singed her face. The surveyors were dead. And, as he stared at Biscuit's lifeless body, she realized Biscuit had saved her—at the cost of his own life.

Jango sat and wept for what seemed like hours, before she began the long walk back toward civilization.

But Biscuit saved more than just Jango's life that day. The C-4 was definitely meant for blowing up innocent people. Jango would never find another agent—another *anyone*—quite like him, ever again. He was a true friend.

## 24 – San Rafael

Jango and Sawyer ate their stakeout food in silence as a light breeze stirred through the dry leaves on the ground. Sawyer could think of nothing to say. He had never been through the trauma and tragedy Jango had, and he hoped he never would. He felt both inferior and lucky.

The wind changed from a rustling to a soft roar. Jango stood up. The Trash Man entered the park. The soft roar wasn't the wind. It was the Trash Man digging through the cans.

Jango signaled for Sawyer to go left while she went right. They assumed their normal flanking maneuver. Jango pinned the Trash Man to the can. He squealed in surprise as she body-checked him. He squealed again as he turned to run and found Sawyer grinning and blocking his path.

Then the Trash Man began to cry.

Sawyer asked him why he was working for the Grey Man.

The Trash Man seemed confused.

Sawyer pushed him a little and Jango increased her pressure. The Trash Man finally blurted out that he had no idea who a Grey Man might be. Did they mean the old man over on Del Ganado that had beaten him one morning when he caught him on his lawn?

Jango eased up the pressure.

Could the Trash Man really have no idea who the Grey Man was? Sawyer didn't think it was likely. He moved in closer so the Trash Man could see Sawyer's teeth and maybe get the idea that Sawyer was crazy enough to bite. He pulled up a little of the old red zone Sawyer. It was an act, of course. He wasn't anywhere close to emotional enough to *actually* enter the red zone, but he could channel an imitation of it, and it sometimes worked well enough to scare honesty out of a perpetrator.

The poor thing just trembled and continued his very wet and teary cry. Jango signaled to Sawyer to ease up. They weren't dealing with a hard case. The intense pressure was doing nothing but frightening the Trash Man. They were getting the opposite of a free flow of information. Jango decided to play good cop.

She turned and told Sawyer to back off and began to pat the Trash Man on the back. She apologized for her partner getting angry. She said they had no beef with the Trash Man. They just needed to know why he was spreading trash everywhere, and they needed him to

stop. Jango asked if someone was paying the Trash Man to do the littering or if he was under somebody's orders. If he was, the Trash Man had nothing to worry about. They just needed to know who was giving the orders.

The gentle tone from Jango seemed to have an effect. His crying settled down into sniveling and then muttering. They couldn't understand him at first but then it became clear that he was repeating over and over that he just liked trash.

Jango repeated what he said back to him as a question and the Trash Man stopped muttering and looked up into her face as if she finally understood him.

He said yes, he just liked trash. He didn't understand why everyone didn't. It smelled so good. He wanted everyone to understand. He could tell Jango understood. She must like trash. He wanted to spread the joy of it to all the people of the neighborhood. Trash shouldn't be isolated in a can, cut off from the noses and fingers and feet. It should be freed. It should be made available on every corner. So every night he came to spread the wealth. He used to do it in the daytime, but he really wasn't a daytime person, and he got yelled at a few times by people who didn't understand. He kept repeating that Jango understood.

Jango did understand. The Trash Man was crazy.

They called the SRPD who agreed to send a case officer to get a statement and take the Trash Man into custody. They also sent someone from social services, given the Trash Man's obvious mental issues. Jango and Sawyer agreed to wait and make sure the Trash Man didn't leave the park. He kept trying to bring Jango and Sawyer along on his crusade to spread the glory of the trash.

Jango promised more people would be coming soon to join them. This wasn't a lie. Sawyer distracted him by asking questions. Sometimes this didn't work at all and the Trash Man would just ignore him and start wandering back toward the trashcans. However, some of the questions sparked intense interest. They listened with interest to the Trash Man's elaborate answers to their simple questions.

Where are you from?

A distant star with purple halos.

What's your favorite color?

Plence. Then followed a long description of this otherworldly color, which sounded fairly close to light brown.

Do you have a family?



Next ensued a long-ranging answer that started with the world as his family and ended with a fairly mundane description of his mother, father and sister.

Do you have a job?

He claimed to work for the Servitor.

Who is the Servitor?

His answer to this question proved the most interesting one of all. It meant absolutely nothing to Jango and Sawyer but it made the Trash Man rapturous, grinning and hopping from foot to foot, his eyes rolling up toward the sky. At first Sawyer thought maybe “Servitor” was an allusion to the Grey Man, but as the Trash Man continued to speak it was clear that the Servitor was nobody Jango and Sawyer had ever met.

The Servitor, as described by the Trash Man, was a giant mound of incandescent consciousness that lived in all locations at once but could only be visited by extragalactic talents of the “first mind” school who could knit together various locations with will-binding spells and then assume the shape of thoughts while preserving the continuity of one’s own conscious. The Trash Man warned them it was not for novices to try. Once contacted, the Servitor filled your mind with blessings and poured out endless amounts of wisdom. In exchange, the Servitor only asked that you do two small tasks a day. One was planted in your brain in the morning of each day by the Servitor himself and usually involved some kind of breakfast food. Toast apparently figured prominently in this. The second was to water the flowers of his kindness with the radiance of your joy. From what Jango and Sawyer could gather, this meant relieving yourself outside on a different plant every day—without being seen.

Strangely, the trash part of the Trash Man’s life had no connection to the Servitor. It was as if one was his religion and the other his job. Spreading trash was like spreading the gospel, while doing the bidding of the extragalactic Servitor was like punching a clock. Although he made it clear that he really loved his job.

Sawyer was beginning to ask him about money when the police arrived and took over with their usual hustle and bustle way of taking over. They paid no attention to Sawyer, and he was a bit miffed.

Jango said the police had plenty to deal with and their thanks would come in the form of the contracted payment. So they moved on.

The sun was setting as they walked past the scene, and suddenly as a police flashlight carelessly illuminated part of the woods, Jango noticed a pair of eyes watching them from behind some bushes. Sawyer

noticed the watching eyes too, and Jango and Sawyer nodded at each other.

They left the park and circled around out of sight of the police, through a backyard up a small path that led back behind the bushes. They crept slowly down the path, separating into their signature flanking positions. When they got to the hiding place, there was nobody there. Whether the lurker had known they would come, got spooked when Jango looked their way or had just picked that moment to leave, they didn't know.

Sawyer sniffed around looking for any sign of the occupant. He found nothing until he began to look at the plants along the edge of the path. Whoever had hidden here would have had to brush past them on the way out. A tuft of thick, grey hair had caught on one of the pricklier bushes. Hair he'd seen before. That color. That thickness. Fea.

## 25 – San Rafael

At Jango and Sawyer's regular meeting with Fea, she brought the subject up before they could. She knew they saw her and she only hid because of the police. She played it safe around cops. Then she proceeded to ask quite a few questions about the Trash Man. All very innocent stuff, like who he was and what he'd been doing. Still it left a weird impression on Jango. Fea asked way too many questions. Hadn't she seen him herself?

Jango brought this up and Fea admitted she had seen him but had stayed far away. He was not one of the Grey Man's people and frankly the Trash Man scared her a bit. He looked crazy.

Jango laughed in agreement and told her the story about the Trash Man's Servitor.

She froze.

Sawyer asked if she had heard that story before. She refused to say anything, seemed incapable of saying anything. She looked at Sawyer but gave no indication that she heard or understood him. Her gaze went right through him as if he wasn't there.

She eventually mumbled the word no.

Sawyer asked if she meant no, she had never heard the story before, but he got no more out of her.

After a bit of waiting and staring she shook her head and looked from Jango to Sawyer. She warned them not to repeat that story to anyone. That it had nothing to do with the Grey Man, and it was no wonder that the Trash Man scared her.

Jango leaned in close and reminded Fea of their deal. Jango wanted more to go on to keep the deal solid. Fea looked like she might cry but began to talk.

Before she moved into the neighborhood, she lived farther north in Marinwood. It had been a fairly boring life, but she made the acquaintance of one wily old resident known only as "The Badger." Most folks in Marinwood left him alone but Fea liked him and became friends with him. She always stopped to talk to him. He said crazy stuff sometimes, which she guessed was why most people ignored him, but she found him harmless—and a little charming.

One evening he asked her to come by his place for a little chat. She thought this was perfectly natural at the time. His place was dirty and small but he tried to make her comfortable. At first they talked

about the usual things like the weather, the crowdedness of the neighborhood, the horrible traffic, new restaurants and the like.

Then he started to bring up one of his crazy topics on the guided nature of life. Hardly the kind of thing to give you the creeps, but it sounded vaguely religious. While Fea normally avoided talking religion, she realized that if she wanted to be good friends with The Badger then she should probably make an effort to understand his beliefs. So she asked a few questions about what he meant.

He began a long lecture, most of which she didn't remember. But she definitely remembered the end. He stood up and leaned over her, hectoring her about the preparations she need to make and how the sinners would be made clear and the old rituals performed. One thing he said above all stuck out in her head. The Badger said the Servitor has found his workman and you will see him in his lowest point and your doom will follow and you will perish unless you save the workman. Then the old coot had screamed that Fea would die and just kept repeating it, screaming.

Fea decided at that moment that he was no longer in the least charming, and she fled and never saw him again. Shortly after that she moved down to Terra Linda. She heard from a few friends that The Badger died in his sleep not long after she moved. They found him peacefully resting in his bed at home. Fea could not picture him as peaceful in any way. Now she wondered if he had been some kind of prophet and if she needed to save the Trash Man.

Jango tried to ease her mind. He told her that visionaries like this often fed off each other and likely the Trash Man had heard The Badger rave at some point and picked up the pattern from there. It was natural to see patterns in things, hence her feeling that the words applied to her in this situation tonight. Jango was overwhelmingly sure this was a meaningless coincidence. Sawyer kept his mouth shut.

Jango could tell that Sawyer didn't agree. So she decided to tell them about a local mission she had carried out in Oakland. She didn't mention the Agency, letting Fea believe she was just working for a police force back then. It wouldn't raise any eyebrows for a private investigator to have once worked for the police.

## 26 – Oakland

Early in Jango's career, just after she moved to Oakland, she trained in urban search and target acquisition. She was on call day or night for drills.

She liked the training but she was dying to get a real mission. She wanted to travel and see exotic sights. The training was a prerequisite for overseas assignments, so she did her best.

Her team often supported divers. Some of the other trainees complained about this "grunt" duty but she enjoyed checking tanks, filling them and watching the divers go in and out of the water on their own training drills.

She also liked field searches quite a bit. In fact she used a lot of what she learned in those exercises later in life when she trained Sawyer. She prided herself on her ability to notice subtle signs and pick out infinitesimal details in fields of seemingly undifferentiated acres of dead yellow grass.

One night when she had just fallen off to sleep, her pager went off. She dragged herself out of bed and headed out to the briefing, just like any other drill. Except this time it wasn't a drill. Based on a tip from an informant, the team was looking for a young male in an area near an aquifer. Her team was instructed to approach with caution and apprehend if possible, or follow the perpetrator if not. This was a dangerous target, possibly armed. They were not briefed on what he had done or why he was wanted. They didn't need to know. They were given a very vague psychological profile that really didn't help much.

Jango was excited. She boarded a truck with a woman she didn't know and they headed out on the highway. Jango wasn't rated to drive but that didn't bother her. It allowed her to save her mental energy for the actual search instead of wasting it trying to figure out how to get to the site. The two talked about why they had joined up and what they thought of the training.

When they got to the aquifer they broke up into groups of three and assigned quadrants to search. Jango got assigned with a big burly man and a hefty woman who walked slowly but were very meticulous, just like her. Their search area was along the water up one side to the west, over a crossover bridge and the back down the other side.

Before they started, the incident commander called them over to give them a supplementary briefing. Their area was a high probability

zone which meant they got to hear a little more about why they were after this subject.

The young male they were after was a gang or cult leader of some sort. He wasn't very organized. He manipulated young drug dealers and fervent religious freaks, but didn't keep a standing organization. The subject used a general story about prophets and their great works and the "servers of the will" and a bunch of other stuff. It was typical garbage according to the commander. They heard that type of junk a lot but this guy was apparently very good at delivering it. He tied together diverse groups with otherwise no common interests into the superstructure of a slightly insane and passionate army.

The intel indicated he planned to make a massive movement on City Hall soon and take over the government. Normally such threats and plans meant nothing, but this guy had shown either incredible luck or an incredible talent. Informants from gangs, anti-government groups, terrorist cells, anarchists, religious cults and a few other similar organizations reported the same plans. The groups were in and ready to support each other.

Before that could happen though, authorities decided to move in on the leader. Without his presence, the groups would likely melt away into their various factions. Only his personality bound them together. When they moved in, he fled here. They had all roads blocked and were keeping watch on the fields and saw no sign that he had left the area, so he must have found a hiding place to wait them out.

They warned the team not to engage the guy in conversation, lest he talk his way into escape. They should radio back as soon as they saw him and await orders unless he was in imminent danger of getting away. Ideally they should locate him unobserved so a team could move in on him carefully.

Jango's team acknowledged the briefing and headed out into the dark to search. They were not allowed flashlights, partly because it ruined night vision and partly because it would alert the subject. This was a silent search—that also meant boring. No conversation as they walked.

The first stretch was easy, rolling over a rather empty path and checking the banks of the waterway for any hidey holes. Jango did most of the checking because it usually meant getting wet, and she was the junior agent. She didn't mind. She loved the water.

About halfway down a section of the aquifer, the path narrowed and the vegetation increased. They cut for sign to see if the subject had

passed that way. Jango's partners were expert trackers and soon had a trail. It was excellent education for Jango. A pattern of bent grass, some scuffed ground, a few disturbed leaves were all they had to go on, but under the tutelage of her partners Jango began to see a path as clearly as if the subject had tracked through mud.

They were fairly certain they were on the trail but Jango insisted on doing some of the routine water checks anyway. Part of this was because she was new and they had stressed in classes that you always follow the routine. She also just felt she ought to look. It was an early example of Jango trusting her instincts.

They got to the end of their search area where a bridge crossed the aquifer. They were supposed to cross the bridge and search the opposite bank on the way back, but the trail they were following continued past the bridge. The big man radioed back and got permission to continue following the trail. He also requested that command send armed backup when they had the chance, just in case the search team ran into anything.

About 100 meters from the bridge, the trail started to lead away from the water into the surrounding field. It was an endless field of uniform grass that stretched on for miles. Once they got out into it, they would rely only on their training to track the subject and not lose their way. This was one of the situations Jango thrived on, but she hadn't done a water check in this area, and protocol called for a thorough one before they moved away from the water.

With just the barest hint of impatience, her partners waited while she conducted the check. Even so, they turned their full attention to the signs that led off into the grass. Jango was alone when she confronted the subject.

He was hidden deep down in the mud near the water's edge. A different curve to her search pattern and she would have missed him. Even then, she could only see a small hump of hair. She couldn't see the rest, even after she determined the hump wasn't her imagination.

She didn't want to linger too long and alert him to her presence. She looked back and forth in a seemingly random pattern, gathering a bit more info every time it passed over the ground near the hump of hair. Eventually she made out the shape of a body in the mud. She walked back to her partners to quietly alert them. Before she made it to the edge of the road, she heard something behind her.

She turned to see him fleeing up the bank away from her. She yelled, blew her search whistle and headed after him. It was still too dark to see clearly but she kept on his tail as he led her up the waterway under the bridge and out into the open field. Had he gone a different way, the backup team would have got him. Instead, only Jango had him in sight. She heard the yells of her search partners in the distance. Jango had slightly broken protocol by taking the lead without backup. But she felt she was really *bending* the protocol more than breaking it.

He led Jango on an exhaustive chase. The field seemed endless. She forgot about everything but her burning legs—and her desire to catch the subject. Still young, Jango was in top condition, and it became clear the subject was not. The clouds shifted to hide the moon but Jango could still see the subject because she had closed almost the whole distance. She got close enough to lunge and try to grab the subject, which made him squeal and shoot forward with an extra burst of speed. She gathered her efforts and lunged again. She almost had him that time. Better yet, she could tell he had spent almost all his energy as he stumbled to get away, moving slower than he had earlier.

They were headed straight for a barbed wire fence. At first Jango hoped her partners could fan out behind her and catch the subject since he would soon be forced to run either right or left. As she got closer she realized he was small enough to slip between the wires, while she was not. She would have to grab him. She made one more lunge and got a good hold on the subject's shoulder, but he wrenched away from her with a violent tug. He squealed again in pain, but it gave him just enough time to wriggle under the fence, getting shredded by the barbed wire in the process.

Jango came to a skidding halt and ordered the subject to stop. In the gloom, she could just make him out. He was stooped and panting on the other side of the fence. She hoped he would stay long enough to get wire clippers or radio someone else to come from the other side. She saw dark drops of blood scattered around the fence where he had scrambled through.

She yelled to him that he was hurt and they could get him treatment if he'd come with them. He laughed in a low voice and said she'd ruined all the prophecies. He'd spread so much faith and now he wouldn't be able to lead them. Not after what she had done to him. He would have to disappear and it was her fault. Jango started to say something but the subject was gone.



Her partners arrived just after he disappeared. She reported what he said about the prophecies and radioed back with her best guess at the direction he took off. They conducted a full search on the other side of the fence but never found him. The blood trail took them to a hole in the ground where he obviously treated his wounds, likely with mud and leaves. The trail stopped there. There was no body and he left no evidence in or around the hole.

A week or so later they had a debriefing to close the case. The leader had not returned, and the various groups began to break up and drift apart. Some of them still espoused the rhetoric of the Servitor and the prophecies, but they were splinter groups now and much easier to deal with. The coordinated attack had been called off. The commander congratulated the team for achieving the mission goal, even if the subject had not been apprehended. He commended Jango for her quick thinking and good efforts and announced her official approval for advanced fieldwork.

## 27 – San Rafael

Jango explained to Fea that the rhetoric spouted by the Trash Man was most likely passed down by some group first created back then. It was nonsense cultish baloney meant to whip gullible followers into a frenzy. Nothing more.

Fea thought maybe the subject Jango had chased was actually onto something. Maybe he hadn't been lying to the leaders and had really found some kind of prophecy or something. How did Jango know for sure?

Jango told her she didn't know entirely for sure, but she felt fairly confident. None of the predictions made about prophecies back then had come true. Oakland was supposed to go up in flames. A great bearded man was supposed to return and set things right in San Francisco. Whatever that meant. Bridges were supposed to fall, earthquakes devastate and storms of unusual strength wipe out whole cities. None of that happened. So the fact that the Trash Man said some stuff that could very loosely be thought of as relevant was probably dumb luck, nothing more.

Fea grunted and nodded her head. She would continue with the plan. She had enough to help them now. She just needed a few more meetings with the Grey Man and she could give them exactly the info they wanted. She warned them to stay away from the Fat Man if they could. Anything they said or did could accidentally make it back to the Grey Man and spoil the whole deal. They had to be extra careful now.

Jango and Sawyer agreed.

Fea said goodnight and left with a look of wondering fear in her eyes.

Jango worried that she was spooked by the Trash Man and might do something stupid. Their leverage over her after catching her at Mary's only went so far. They had to count on the fact that she really wanted to bring down the Grey Man like she said. Sawyer kept silent, a sure sign something was bothering him. Jango didn't push it.

## 28 – San Rafael

Thus began the longest week of Jango's life. At least Sawyer had a job to distract his attention. Jango sat each day in the office ignoring paperwork and staring out the window at the pond, sighing. She had a few minor cases to work on but she just wasn't into it. She even moped along on her walks with Eileen. Jango reassured her she wasn't sick but just needed some time to herself.

Every night she'd grill Sawyer about everything he saw that day at work. Any sign of the Double Y gang returning to Petaluma? Did he hear anything about the return of the Coyotes? Had he checked the bush to see if the Fat Man wanted to talk? Sawyer wearily answered the questions, grumbling that he would tell her anything worth knowing as soon as he knew it.

Casework piled up that week, but it didn't help in the least. Jango solved most of them alone in one day. Mrs. Jensen's washing was not being stolen; she just needed to use clothespins. It was all piled up in the ditch at the back of her neighbor's yard.

Gangsters weren't syphoning off the gas tank on Red's pickup truck in the night. He just had a hairline crack that was leaking. A trip to the mechanic would have solved it earlier. Jango suspected Red probably had some wishful thinking about the gas mileage. Barney's "ghosts" turned out to be the next-door neighbor leaving a radio on outside with bad reception that caused the "voices" to come and go "with the wind" as you might expect with a weak AM transmission.

At the end of the week, she caught one case that was at least a little mysterious and required Sawyer's help. A young woman named Stacy had just moved into the neighborhood from San Francisco and didn't know many people. She worked long hours at her job in the city and wasn't home during the day. She had hired a gardening service to come and mow her lawn and rake leaves once every two weeks, but other than that, her house was empty.

Terra Linda was a low crime area but, like any neighborhood with enough people in it, they had occasional robberies. Just to be safe, Stacy installed an alarm system in her house. Even with the gardeners and the alarm, she was still worried, so when she came home one day to find muddy footprints all through her house, she was horrified. It was not the scheduled day for the gardening service but she called them anyway. How could muddy footprints be left without the alarm being

tripped unless it was the gardeners? The gardening service insisted they had not been by her house.

She called the police but they said if nothing was missing, they really couldn't do much except log the intrusion. They pretty much admitted they wouldn't follow up unless something else occurred. They told her robbers didn't break into houses just to track mud around and leave behind the valuables.

She dismissed it as an inexplicable odd occurrence. But then it happened again a week later. That's when she called Jango and Sawyer. Jango asked to look around the house but Stacy had already cleaned up the mud so there wasn't much to see. The security system didn't have any observable weaknesses. Jango pressed Stacy but she swore that everything was like she left it except for the footprints.

Jango told her to call if it happened again and not to clean up the prints next time. They would need them as evidence. At the very end of the long, long week, Stacy called and said it happened again. Jango and Sawyer both went over to examine the prints. The tracks started at the front door, led back into the master bedroom, turned around, came out, tracked through the living room, cut through the kitchen and left the house through the door into the garage.

Jango got the impression whoever was doing the mud-tracking waltz in the lady's house was looking for something and not finding it. But why would they be so ridiculously stupid as to leave mud tracks behind and why leave through the garage? Stacy kept her Toyota Corolla in the driveway and her Karmann Ghia in the garage. She only drove the Ghia occasionally when she was headed out for a date or some after-work event. In fact, she had driven it today, so the intruder would find nothing in the garage but the trashcans. Stacy didn't store anything in the garage.

Sawyer tracked the mud prints back out the front door to the driveway and up to the Corolla but they disappeared. It looked like the intruder had walked on the sidewalk and pavement up until they slipped and fell while going around the car and that's where they got the mud on their shoes. He tracked them again through the house and guessed the muddy suspect was about 5' 3" and possibly female. The prints led out to the garage where they also disappeared. They faded out on the garage floor near where the Ghia was parked. Sawyer asked Stacy to back her Ghia out so he could see if the prints showed him anything else under the car.

She was reluctant to move it since it was raining but she obliged. The prints carried on just under where the front of the Karmann Ghia had been, took a sharp left and then stopped. Sawyer couldn't figure it out. He asked Stacy if she had driven her Ghia on the day of the other two muddy footprint incidents. She thought back and said that in fact she had.

The prints outside made sense then. The intruder was headed down the driveway on rainy days when the Corolla was parked in the drive and had slipped into the mud walking around the car. It was a pretty careless move to be sure, but it made sense. The footprints disappearing in the middle of the empty garage didn't make any sense at all however. And how did the intruder get out of the garage anyway? Stacy said the garage door was closed and locked when she got home.

Jango and Sawyer walked back through the house examining the tracks. The mud had no special characteristics, so it definitely came from the yard. Jango had no other ideas and finished taking the last of her pictures before wrapping up. Sawyer kept staring at the mud while Stacy gave some final pieces of largely irrelevant information to Jango.

That's when he noticed Stacy's feet. He asked her if those were the shoes she wore to work. She said she wore sneakers because she was on her feet so much at the office. It wasn't a cubicle job. She was running around all day from meeting to meeting and delivering updates and such. She tried to make it sound important. Sawyer had already guessed she worked in the mailroom. His head snapped back and forth between her shoes and the tracks several times and then he began to laugh and talk fast.

He asked Stacy if he could look inside her Karmann Ghia. She seemed puzzled, and possibly a bit offended at his apparent laughing at her shoe choice, but she agreed. On the floorboards by the gas pedal and brake, Sawyer found some smears of mud. He showed them to Jango and she began to laugh too.

Stacy seemed a bit put out and asked them what was so funny. Sawyer told her to look at the bottom of her shoes. She did and found some dried, caked mud. She paused for a bit with a blank expression and began to snicker herself. Sawyer guessed that whenever she decided to drive the Karmann Ghia she usually started going outside to the Corolla first, then remembered she was going to drive the Ghia, then remembered the keys were in her bedroom, went back in through the front door, got the keys and then headed back to the garage without looking back.

Sawyer further guessed this had happened coincidentally each day the muddy intruder had been found. Stacy was laughing pretty hard now. The prints matched her sneaker tread perfectly. She was the intruder and in too much of a rush in the morning to notice. Hence the ability to break in without setting off the alarm and vanishing from the garage right next to the Karmann Ghia's driver's side door.

Stacy was embarrassed but thanked them and promised she would wipe her feet from now on and check behind her before she left the house. She apologized for wasting their time. Jango assured her no apology was necessary and Sawyer chimed in that it was the most interesting case they'd had all week. Best of all, nobody got hurt and nobody had to go to jail. All around they considered it a win for everybody.

When Jango and Sawyer got back into the office they were in a better mood. Not every case shook their world apart or left them with an unsolvable conundrum. Sawyer laughed hard about how puzzled he had been when he found the tracks disappeared in the garage. Now it seemed so obvious. They were having a very good laugh about it when Jango saw a note had been slid under the door.

It was unsigned and said only "We have Fea." They stopped laughing abruptly. Sawyer headed out to the Fat Man's bushes right away. Jango was right behind him.

## 29 – San Rafael

There was no sign of the Fat Man. Sawyer rushed in yelling, despite Jango's warnings, but got no response. He looked through the whole thicket, nosing into every dark corner. He could tell the Fat Man had been there recently. Sawyer left the thicket panting breathlessly from his search. He felt the old hints of the red zone nipping at the back of his mind, but he kept control.

Jango had found something. A stride or two away from the thicket's entrance were drops of blood. Whoever was bleeding had stopped there for a moment and the drops had formed a small pool before the bleeder moved on.

Sawyer thought it might be Fea's blood. The trail led uphill away from the thicket and across a field of dead, yellow grass. It always amazed Sawyer how smooth these kinds of fields looked from far away. Up close they were jungles. Even though the grass wasn't very high relative to the thicket, it was still high enough to make walking through it difficult. If you didn't have a path to follow, the grass tugged at your legs, and sometimes even hit you in the face. If you tried to walk straight through it, you had to take huge steps and attempt to pat it down. If you walked around the little tufts, it took forever.

They followed the blood trail as it wound around the tufts of grass and headed toward a copse of trees. Sawyer recognized it as one of the old hideouts the Coyotes had used. The trail of blood faded out. The bleeder's cut must have clotted or been bandaged. The trail died right outside the copse. Jango told Sawyer to stay outside as she nosed around in the thicket.

Jango emerged shaking her head, and Sawyer signaled for her to be quiet. He heard a rustling that wasn't the wind. Jango heard it too. Sawyer headed toward the source. A few meters from the copse he found the Fat Man lying in a pool of blood, holding a blood-soaked handkerchief to his wound. As they got closer they heard a low moan.

Jango bent down and tried to help, but the Fat Man shook her off. He said he was dying and there was nothing she could do for him. Jango told him that was not true but he waved her away. His eyes brightened a little when he noticed Sawyer and called him closer. Sawyer bent down by the Fat Man and told him he was sorry.

The Fat Man said it was OK. He had lived the life he chose to live and he had few regrets. His one regret was trusting the Grey Man.

He had been triple crossed. The Fat Man had no idea Fea was spying for Jango and Sawyer.

The Grey Man found out and confronted Fea about it. She denied everything but the Grey Man took her anyway and then unexpectedly stabbed the Fat Man, whispering a message for Jango as he did. Then, out loud, the Grey Man had announced that this was a warning to all.

Sawyer looked concerned at this and began to pace again.

Jango asked the Fat Man to tell her the message. He did.

The Fat Man didn't know what it meant and he may have gotten the wording wrong but he thought he had the gist of it.

Sawyer asked Jango what it meant.

She had assumed the Grey Man was just a local ne'er-do-well with something to hide. The Grey Man thought it was personal. Most of the inexplicable behavior at the pond made sense. He was baiting her. He had let her know that. This gave her an advantage she didn't have before. So why had he done it?

Sawyer thought it was just pride, but Jango wasn't sure. Someone as good at this game as the Grey Man would anticipate Jango's reaction. The hunt had moved into a new phase and if Jango didn't figure it out, the Grey Man would still have the advantage.

The Fat Man began to shudder and Sawyer leaped to his side. He pitied the poor creature. The Fat Man had been misled into a false religious war and then cast aside by a cruel mastermind. Sawyer tried to comfort the Fat Man. Before he breathed his last, he whispered one last piece of information. Sawyer's eyes grew huge as he listened. Then the Fat Man shuddered, dropped his head back on the ground and died.

Sawyer freaked out a little bit and Jango moved in to calm him. He was angry. He wanted to make the Grey Man pay. He was angry at the cavalier attitude with which the Grey Man tossed aside a miserable life. Deep down, Sawyer knew that without a few chance events it could have been him stalking crazily through the hills above Terra Linda, scratching out a miserable existence, ranting about prophets and losing control in a way that made him easy to manipulate.

Sawyer knew he should settle down, reign in his anger, control it, channel it and use it against the Grey Man. He wanted to find the criminal, free Fea, and put him behind bars forever. Jango looked into Sawyer's eyes and nodded. Sawyer told her what the Fat Man had said. Jango looked surprised then had a blazing look of her own. She led the



way out of the copse of trees and up the hill. They knew what they had to do now.

## 30 – San Rafael

As they reached the top of the hill, Jango stopped Sawyer. She needed to do this part alone. He didn't like it but agreed. Jango descended down the other side of the hill toward the valley that faced the Marinwood neighborhood. She kept her eyes sharp for what the Fat Man had described.

Before long she found an outcropping of grey rocks and slowed down as she moved cautiously toward them. When she was a few meters away, she called out. A dark form rose up from among the rocks and began to move toward her.

It asked why she was there. They were honoring the agreement.

Jango acknowledged this and mentioned that the Fat Man had told her where to find them.

The leader of the Coyotes moved farther out of the shadows to stand toe to toe with Jango. He growled low at the mention of the Fat Man. Jango told him the Fat Man was dead. The Coyote nodded solemnly.

Jango asked if the Fat Man had done business with the Coyotes. The leader admitted the Fat Man ran messages between the Grey Man and the gang. The Coyotes barely tolerated him. He was more of a meal than an associate but he was the Grey Man's pick and they respected their truces, as Jango well knew. While the death of any living thing was sad in its own way, this did not especially concern the Coyote leader and still did not explain why Jango was here.

She explained about the Grey Man and Fea and their plan to finally discover what he was after. The Coyotes' leader remained politely quiet but uninterested, and a tad impatient. Jango changed that attitude. The Fat Man had told Sawyer that the Grey Man had abducted the Coyote leader's son, just a small boy barely able to stand on his own. Jango asked why the Grey Man would risk doing that—and why the Coyotes had not ripped him apart.

The leader looked angry. For a half a second Jango worried he might lash out. He shook off his temper and stared her down. The Grey Man was audacious and deserved to die, according to the Coyote leader, but he was also clever and the leader could not risk losing his son. The Grey Man wanted the Coyotes' help in something. Until they had finished helping, the leader would not get his son back. He hoped the Grey Man understood that when he got his son back he would take

revenge. Jango pointed out that if the Grey Man did understand this, he would likely never see his son again. The leader said the Grey Man would die either way. But if he killed the leader's son, the Grey Man would die much more painfully.

At first, the Coyotes simply gathered information and a few meager supplies—easy stuff as far as it went. Lately the Grey Man had asked the Coyotes to do things on Jango's side of the hill and the leader had resisted. Despite the risk, he made clear that he would not lightly break his agreement. He worked out new details with the Grey Man and thought it was settled when Jango brought this news. He asked if Jango was the new messenger.

Jango shook her head vigorously. She reminded the Coyote leader of her plans with Fea.

The leader just shrugged as if to say the two plans were not mutually exclusive. So he asked one last time what Jango wanted.

After an agonizing few minutes, Jango came back over the hill. Sawyer pestered her with questions. Yes, the Coyotes had been where the Fat Man had said, and yes, the Grey Man was working with them and holding the leader's son captive. And yes, he had agreed to the plan with one modification.

That worried Sawyer. Any modification made by the leader of the Coyotes would not likely be beneficial for Sawyer.

It was worse than Sawyer expected. Sawyer would go under cover and serve as one of the Coyotes under the command of the leader. Sawyer argued that this plan was not only unwise but also unsafe. He reminded Jango what happened the last time Sawyer negotiated with the Coyotes.

Jango assured him he would not be harmed. The Coyote leader wanted control of that part of the plan if he agreed to it.

Still, Sawyer was not looking forward to it. And Jango added that if he wanted to back out, he would be letting Fea get hurt and the Grey Man get away.

Sawyer said nothing.

When they returned to the office they sat quietly, thinking of all the challenges they faced. Jango pieced a few more things together. The ravings of the Fat Man nagged at her mind, especially the Grey Man's message. The Grey Man's message to Jango through the Fat Man had been, "The chase would not be as fun, but he would turn the tables on

her this time and she would be left fleeing in the fields.” Fleeing in the fields. She remembered a muddy bank of water. She remembered burning muscles and a seemingly endless chase. She almost figured it out when Sawyer interrupted.

He had fought to keep himself out of the red zone the whole time they were in the hills talking to the Fat Man. He suppressed his anger at the deal Jango had made. Now that they were home and safe, it all came tumbling out. He cursed their fate. He cursed Fea. He cursed the Grey Man and he cursed himself. He wasn’t prepared for this. Why couldn’t things stay the way they were? Why couldn’t he just work as a project manager and be happy? Why did they have to protect the neighborhood anyway? What thanks did they ever get for it? They were never held up as examples. In fact, people crossed the street when they saw Jango coming. Sawyer felt like a pariah. Why should he live like that? He settled down into a whiny cry.

Jango tried to comfort him. She sighed as he cried. She reminded him they didn’t do it for anyone else. They did it for themselves. Inside, they had the instinct that it was right, and the Grey Man was wrong. They had a duty to alert others to the danger no matter how they reacted. They were luckier than most because they knew their purpose. Finally Jango told Sawyer he could do it. That she wouldn’t have wasted years of training on him if she didn’t think he could. His only failing might be that he didn’t believe it.

Sawyer stopped whining and looked up at her. He never loved her more than he did right then. He nodded. It was all the thanks she needed.

The next morning Sawyer had a brainstorm. It wouldn’t change the overall plan, but it might help keep Fea safer. They knew where the Grey Man was and they knew when he would be there and when Fea would be too. Why go in with guns blazing? Sawyer would sneak in and free Fea and guide her out, then if guns needed to blaze, Jango could go in while Sawyer went off to the Coyotes for his part of the plan. According to Sawyer, that meant Jango needed backup.

Jango said she didn’t need backup. She’d gotten out of tougher scrapes before.

## 31 – Volgograd, Russia

Jango's fiercest fight happened in a burned-out neighborhood in Volgograd. It was one of the few deniable missions she ever conducted. Howard had briefed her on the flight to Berlin. There she boarded a plane that took her over eastern Russia where she parachuted in solo. Her mission was to meet an informer at a cafe on the Volga River. It was a human rights mission. The informer was delivering evidence of human rights abuses in Chechnya and Kazakhstan. The Russians had no intention of anyone learning about the events in Chechnya, and they made no bones about telling the U.S. they had no business investigating it.

The government ordered the Agency to uncover what was really going on without exposing the government to retaliation. Howard made clear this was not an altruistic mission.

"The government isn't going to hand this over to the Human Rights Watch, mind you," he told Jango during their flight. "At least not unless Russia forces their hand. But if we're going to battle them on the diplomatic stage, we need good intel on what's happening there."

Jango understood. She didn't love it, but she understood. It was her job. She often got called bullheaded but in this case her bullheadedness served the Agency well. Finding out intel about human rights abuses and handing it over to the government did not pose a moral problem to Jango's rather black and white view of the universe. She focused on doing her job.

The first half of the mission went well. She parachuted in undetected and unbundled packets of papers she would need in Volgograd. Her next step was to make it back to Berlin where she would meet Howard. She made the long walk into the city, admiring the countryside and thinking about its history. This was the former Stalingrad. She occasionally saw monuments and markers commemorating the siege by the Nazis in the 1940s and the victory of the Red Army. Despite the mostly negative view of Uncle Joe Stalin in Russia, people still thought positively of the name Stalingrad. It had been the victory that, to many Russians, proved their character, no matter what ideology or leader held sway at the time.

Khrushchev had changed the name when he distanced the government from the heritage of Stalin's dictatorial rule, and they couldn't very well have changed it back to its original name of Tsaritsyn.

So they named the city after the legendary river that ran through it. The Volga was the psychological barrier the Russians didn't want the Germans to cross. It was also Jango's destination.

Nobody took notice of her as she wandered into the city center and found the cafe. She sat down and ordered tea. Her informer arrived, sat down and ordered tea too. He gave the proper countersigns and they made some idle chatter. Finally he passed over a small USB thumb drive. Jango verified the contents on a handheld reader that, a few years later, would look silly next to an iPhone, but at the time it was unthinkably high tech. She thanked the man, finished her tea and left.

She thought she was done, ready to leave Volgograd by bus and make her way back to Berlin. But she never entirely let her guard down or she would never have returned from Volgograd alive. She felt the abductors behind her before she heard or smelled them and broke into a run. They had meant to grab her and throw her in a van. Instead they had to chase her at top speed.

This wasn't exactly a new situation for Jango. She'd been through worse, but in every one of those situations she had a partner or Howard or both. Now she had nobody to cause diversions. No matter how hard she ran she couldn't increase her lead. She found herself in an unfamiliar industrial neighborhood, filled with derelict warehouses and frequent pools of toxic muck. As soon as she noticed the lack of people, she heard the first shots. They wanted that thumb drive and they were willing to bring her down to get it.

She looked for a defensible position. She didn't know the terrain and they did. She found what she thought was a decent nook on the second floor of an abandoned building and pulled her rifle out of her pack, assembling it in a hurry. She'd packed it in case she needed to defend herself against wildlife on the trek in from the parachute site. It wasn't the weapon she wanted against a group of three hostiles with semi-automatics but it was what she had. She was, literally, loaded for bear.

She fired off the first round as an announcement of her ability to defend herself and saw them scatter in three separate directions. She giggled a bit at the comic way they ducked and scrambled. They hadn't expected that. Well honestly, they must not have expected a chase. They thought they would surprise her, toss her in a van, get the hard drive and dump her at the bottom of the Volga. She wondered how much stomach they had for this job. Were they contractors? Staff?

She decided to test. She picked a direction and watched closely until she knew exactly where one of them was. He couldn't be a pro. His elbows hung out in plain sight. She shot right through the bench he was lying behind. He dropped; making her think she had hit him, then popped up fast and took off running. One of the others yelled something but the man was gone. Down to two.

The others weren't scared by gunshots and began to shoot back. It was a standoff. Either someone would hear and call the police, which could be a different kind of horrible for Jango, or one of them would get lucky and hit someone. Jango would need to get lucky twice. She hated those odds. So she changed them. She shot off one more round to make the two duck then headed downstairs and out the back door.

It didn't fool them but her shot gave her just enough lead. Out the back was an alley that led to the main street. She knew that if they had any sense, one of them would come at her from through the building and the other one down the alley. She counted on it.

When they arrived, one from each direction as expected, they saw an empty alley. They slowly walked forward toward each other, losing their caution as they went. They met in the middle looking puzzled. Jango emerged from under a step that led down from the building she had been shooting from earlier. Before they even saw her, she dropped them both with shots to the knee and took off running.

## 32 – San Rafael

Sawyer didn't like that story. And he wanted to know more about the part when she was hiding under a step. How could that possibly work?

She grumbled that she was a bit skinnier back then. Sawyer insisted that the man coming down the alleyway must have been able to see her. Jango pointed out that they expected her to be up above and they both were looking up as they came into the alley. They thought she would either be standing, running or climbing.

Granted, if one of them had thought to look right at her under the step, she would have been dead. But because she fit into its shadow and it had a big overhang, she wasn't obvious. Sawyer forced her to demonstrate and Jango was just getting under a counter ledge in the kitchen when the doorbell rang.

Sawyer yelled with surprise and they both leaped as if stung and ran. When they got to the door, nobody was there, but someone left a plain box for Jango. On the box was simply written, "To Jango, From You Know Who." She carefully opened the box.

Inside was a lock of Fea's hair and a scrap of paper. On the paper someone had scrawled the words "Come and get her."

Sawyer started to howl, but Jango stopped him. She told him that was exactly what the Grey Man wanted. She stressed that they needed to stick to the plan. Sawyer calmed down some and they set the next phase in motion.

Jango felt younger. The old, familiar feeling of adrenaline pumped through her veins as she crouched in the grass. She resisted the irrational compulsion to sprint out into the field. The tension between disciplined caution and unbounded energy was a constant companion in her Agency days. She knew that, at her age, she couldn't really survive feeling it all the time. She already sensed the edges of exhaustion. But she loved feeling that tension again.

She crept forward through the grass and saw the Grey Man camped out in a small valley between two folds of a hill. It was a formation Jango had heard called a saddle and an excellent hiding place. Nobody could take them by surprise, they thought, because they were



surrounded by high ground. All trails and roads avoided it, so nobody was likely to wander by.

Jango managed to get close without being seen, moving as carefully and quietly as possible. She used every bit of her training, and even with the pain in her knee, she held perfect control over her steps. She didn't crack a twig or rustle a blade of grass. Whenever anyone in the camp below glanced her way she stood motionless. Unless they knew exactly where she was, they wouldn't see her. She blended into the tall grass all around her.

The Grey Man moved around in the camp ranting and raving. He had built the camp up against a large outcropping of rock. He tied up Fea under the overhang. She was unconscious or possibly just asleep. The Grey Man was preparing something and his lackey was apparently not going about the preparations satisfactorily.

Jango got as close as she dared while the Grey Man was still in the camp. Hopefully the lackey wouldn't be left behind to watch over Fea. If he was, Jango would have to knock out the lackey, which she could do, but it would be cleaner if they could get Fea away without making themselves known. Then she could surprise the Grey Man and help Sawyer faster.

Jango lay down in the grass to take the pressure off her knee. After only a few long moments, another lackey came bustling into the valley. He passed close to Jango. She could have leaped from her spot and tackled him if she wanted. If he hadn't been in such a hurry, she would have been caught. The lackey rushed by, down into the campsite.

He began a heated exchange of information with the Grey Man, who didn't like what this second lackey had to say at all. In fact lackey two got cuffed about the ears. It didn't surprise Jango that the Grey Man was the kind to shoot the messenger. She thought he was so angry he would take both lackeys when he left. Come on, she thought. Fea's all tied up and you need as much backup as possible.

As if responding to her unspoken thoughts, the Grey Man stopped berating lackey two and turned to lackey one and grabbed him, making him drop several logs of wood. He yelled at them both and his voice carried up to Jango, confirming that Sawyer's part was going according to plan. After a burst of cursing, he led both lackeys up and out of the valley without a glance back at Fea. Jango waited a few minutes to make sure the Grey Man didn't change his mind about guarding Fea. Then she moved down into the campsite.

Sawyer felt himself edging dangerously near the red zone. He needed to get under control. Now. Jango thought he could control himself, so that meant he could. She trained him well. She trusted him. He needed to fulfill that trust. That didn't mean he wasn't scared to death. He jumped at every perfectly normal sound of the wind or rustle of grass.

It was normal to feel frightened going to this kind of meeting. He wasn't exactly the guy who handled these sorts of things well in the past. He took a deep breath tried not to freak out.

The breeze disappeared as he got near the meeting site. He couldn't see the actual spot yet. He would have to get up to the top of the last switchback on the hill before he would see it. If they ambushed him, he'd have no time to react. Of course that wasn't the plan. He trusted them because Jango told him to, because they gave their word. He needed to stop this merry-go-round of paranoia or he'd never make it.

He got to the last turn on the switchback and came up over the edge of the hill, bracing himself.

Nobody was there.

This was the worst thing he could have imagined. He felt like the ground had been ripped out from under him. He felt so unstable that wasn't too sure he hadn't slipped into the red zone without realizing it. How long had he been standing there?

A shadow moved in the corner of his eye and Sawyer was down before he could think. The next thing he knew, the leader of the Coyotes had him down on the ground and the rest of the gang was looming over him menacingly. He experienced a weird out-of-body sensation as he snapped and growled. The leader of the Coyotes was yelling at him.

Sawyer simmered down to silence as the leader's yelling sputtered out.

Sawyer felt ashamed and asked how long he had freaked out for. This seemed to take the leader back and he looked toward an older one of the Coyotes who used the word "spirit," but Sawyer didn't understand the rest. The leader turned back to Sawyer and asked him the last thing he remembered. Sawyer mentioned coming up the switchback and seeing nobody there, and the next thing he knew he was lying on the ground.

The leader nodded and told him he had been taken by something the Coyotes called "The Spirit." It was a sort of fighting

madness some of the younger gang members experienced when they first went into combat. The only cure was experience, but at least they understood. He told Sawyer it did not inspire confidence and he would have words with Jango about it after this was all over. He let Sawyer get back on his feet.

Sawyer felt the almost-forgotten stiffness that always came on him after a red zone incident and stretched as he got up. He explained about the red zone and how it hadn't happened in a long time. He probably needed to get that out of his system and it was better it came out now than later. The leader silently nodded agreement but still didn't look very pleased.

Sawyer suggested they get down to business.

Sawyer led the way to a flat area halfway up a hill. The Coyotes had told Jango and Sawyer about the place. He led only in that they made him go first.

It marked the intersection of several paths that led farther uphill in three different directions. One of the Grey Man's lackeys waited for them there, fast asleep in the grass by the side of the farthest road. Sawyer walked over and nudged him awake. Lackey Two jumped to his feet and began to bark questions at Sawyer before he noticed the Coyotes.

It was apparent that Lackey Two did not like the job of messenger. The leader of the Coyotes moved up next to Sawyer and quietly told the lackey a message for the Grey Man. The Grey Man had broken their trust by killing the Fat Man.

Lackey Two began protesting that they hadn't killed the Fat Man, but the leader snapped that lies would not make the situation better.

The leader said they would not run any more errands for the Grey Man until they met face to face. In fact, the leader emphasized, he considered their deal to be off—broken by the Grey Man. He made it clear that breaking a deal with the Coyotes was a very bad idea.

The lackey looked eager to deliver the message because delivering the message meant he would get away from the Coyote leader's withering look.

The lackey started to go but the leader grabbed him, and Sawyer saw terror in those eyes. The leader could deliver death at any moment. The lackey thought it was coming then and pleaded for his life. Sawyer

snapped that they wouldn't ask him to deliver a message if they wanted him dead. The leader snarled for Sawyer to shut up, then got his face close to Lackey Two and said they wanted to see the Grey Man now, in person. He let the lackey scamper away into the hills to find the Grey Man.

After he was out of sight, the leader rounded on Sawyer and snapped at him. His message was crystal clear: Nobody interrupted him and if Sawyer had been a gang member he would have regretted it dearly. Sawyer was not to make the same mistake again.

Sawyer looked annoyed and abashed all at once. The leader didn't dwell on it but moved rapidly into organizing the gang into position. He doubted Lackey Two would deliver any valuable tactical information to the Grey Man. Just in case, they built a defensive position with the ability to strike from several directions at a word. Sawyer marveled at the professionalism this so-called rogue gang showed.

The wait seemed to last forever. Sawyer began to pace. The Coyote leader growled at him to settle down. Sawyer finally lay down and dozed. He was drifting in a half-sleep thinking of a steak dinner when a noise woke him. He didn't want to let the dream go. The mouthfuls of meat were so succulent and delicious. In his half-aware state he wasn't sure they weren't real. Why was someone shouting? He needed to concentrate on this delicious food and it was hard with someone yelling. Slowly he remembered that he was lying in a field above Terra Linda waiting with the Coyotes. So where did this meal come from? With that thought, the steak disappeared. But the yelling didn't stop. It was a dream. So why didn't the yelling go away? With a jolt, he leaped to his feet. The Coyote leader was yelling at everyone to get up and get ready.

The Grey Man and his two lackeys came up the hill. The Grey Man looked furious. It was the first time Sawyer had ever seen him head on. They had mostly chased him near the pool and heard stories about him. They had never confronted him directly. The Grey Man's eyes were dark brown, fierce and cunning, though not necessarily intelligent. Sawyer thought if the eyes were the windows to the soul, then the Grey Man must be soulless. His eyes led to an empty room.

The Grey Man stopped several meters from the Coyote leader and spit on the ground. He harangued the leader for breaking his word. He insulted him in every way Sawyer had ever heard and many he

hadn't. He spent quite a long time impugning the leader. Sawyer wasn't sure what the point was because it didn't soften up the Coyote—quite the opposite. The Grey Man was outnumbered, so he couldn't force the leader to do anything he didn't want to. It didn't seem very smart. So what was the Grey Man doing? He wouldn't just blow his advantage like this.

As the Grey Man kept ranting, and the leader of the Coyotes kept a blank expression, Sawyer puzzled it out. The Grey Man knew he couldn't win with concessions. He also thought the Coyote leader had no interest in eliminating the Grey Man. Far from it—the Coyotes could operate better with something to distract Jango. He was setting his negotiating bar as far back as possible, so when he did have to give on something, it was something he didn't care much about. The Grey Man had no idea the Coyotes were no longer on his side.

There was something else. The way the associates hung back and to the side. Sawyer thought they would flank the Grey Man one on each side from behind. Instead they were leaving his right side open. They had something else planned. While the Grey Man continued to bluster, Sawyer leaned over toward the Coyote leader and whispered. The leader nodded and deliberately walked over toward the Grey Man's right side and, with a few efficient signals, emptied the area to the Grey Man's left.

That stopped the Grey Man. He asked what the Coyotes were doing.

Rather than explain what was going on, the leader laid down a very terse set of conditions. The Grey Man had broken his word by killing the Fat Man. The Coyotes were no longer in business with him and since they didn't do business with liars, they wouldn't be again. However, they wouldn't eliminate the Grey Man, as they felt they probably should, if he vacated the area and planned to never show his face in Marin County again.

The Grey Man's eyes gleamed. He looked pleased as if he was settling in for a long, satisfying haggle. He started to open his mouth but the leader cut him off with a loud howl that meant one thing: Go!

The Grey Man's mouth hung open as he slowly realized this was not, in fact, a negotiation. A mean look set in his eyes as his mouth closed. He reached in his pocket and the leader yelled for him to stop but it was too late. An explosion ripped through the field to the Grey Man's right. As the smoke cleared, his lackeys moved onto that side, leaving the left empty.

The leader was shouting orders but there were too many gang members. He wouldn't get his gang members shifted in time to avoid another explosion on the Grey Man's left side.

Sawyer was on top of the Grey Man before he realized it, panting hard. For a split second he marveled at himself and thought it was over. But his attention was entirely on the arm that had activated the explosions. Sawyer felt a sharp pain in his side and saw he'd been stabbed. It wasn't deep, and certainly not fatal, but it was painful enough to let the Grey Man get out from under him. It also gave the Grey Man a chance to blow the other charge.

Sawyer had bought enough time to get most of the gang away from the explosion, but two or three stragglers were still caught in it. The Grey Man was already charging away and the leader of the Coyotes was after him. Sawyer ignored the pain and charged after as well.

Out of the corner of his eye, Sawyer saw the associates had already been captured and the Grey Man was on the run. As they chased him, Sawyer found it odd not to have the instant communication he shared with Jango. The leader was clever for sure, but they didn't know each other well enough to coordinate their attack. Even with their best efforts, the Grey Man began to outdistance them. They flew down paths, up hills, over hillocks and through copses, tearing through the hills above Terra Linda. The light was starting to fail. Sawyer knew they would have to catch him soon. The Grey Man began to fade into the twilight as he gained distance. Sawyer thought hard. Nothing came to him.

Finally, they came over a hill and saw no trace of the Grey Man. He must have been far enough ahead to change course in a way they couldn't follow from their distance. They slowed, knowing that racing in the wrong direction certainly wouldn't help. The Coyote leader began to look for signs. He found some but Sawyer knew they would take too long to follow and the Grey Man would definitely escape if they tracked him that way. The Coyote leader realized it too. They stood panting and looking off into the twilight, saying nothing.

Sawyer felt uncomfortable. Jango hadn't turned up. That worried him. He had no other backup, and the deal with the Grey Man had just fallen apart. He stood on a remote, darkening hillside alone with an angry gang leader and no leverage.

The leader slowly turned and began to walk back down the hill. Sawyer followed, but the leader told him not to. He didn't even turn his

head, just said to stay away. Sawyer heard more than just warning in his voice. He heard death.

Sawyer walked slowly in another direction, heading down the hill away from the meeting place and the Coyotes. He thought about the long pursuit of the Grey Man and it couldn't have ended worse. All they strived for came to nothing. The Coyotes had come back to the neighborhood and Sawyer had angered them. He hadn't felt this bad since he crashed a party in Merced.

### 33 – Merced

It had been one of many long, cold nights for Sawyer. He'd lost track of how many days it had been since he ate. Maybe five? Six? He couldn't be sure. Too many. He'd been drinking brackish water from ponds left after the rain. Barely enough to keep him hydrated.

So when he walked past a shed and saw warm, inviting light spilling out, heard the laughter, and above all, smelled the food, he couldn't resist stopping. He'd been on the streets for a while now and he knew how to carry himself with confidence. It wasn't a deep confidence. He lived precariously close to death for that. But it was confidence nonetheless and it charmed almost everyone.

He walked into the party with the air of someone who belonged there. He knew he looked a little bedraggled. He was too skinny and his hair was matted. If someone gave him an unwelcoming stare, he returned it with his most winning smile. Everyone just nodded and turned back to their conversations, assuming he was someone else's problem. He found a spread of food and began to help himself.

A girl came up and started talking to him about the party and the night, generally making small talk. Things were going quite well. It was warm. He was comfortable. He had a drink, a little food and felt the best he had in weeks. If he didn't feel exactly safe, well, that was a result of living in fear all the time. It was a hard feeling to shake.

Eventually the conversation with the girl went so well that she invited him into a back room. Feeling very confident and full of good luck, he followed her almost unquestioningly. She led him to a room with nothing but two chairs in it. This should have struck him as odd, but instead, he just turned and began to ask her if this was the most comfortable room they could find only to see the door slam shut. He was trapped. His good feelings drained away as fast as they had come. A big guy with blonde and black hair came in and began to bully him.

Sawyer didn't even try to con the guy. He admitted he only came in for the warmth and food. The big guy got in Sawyer's face and demanded he pay for what he took. Sawyer explained he had nothing and the big guy threatened to take it out of his flesh. It turned out this was not a joke and no exaggeration. After a few hours, the big guy came back and dragged Sawyer out through the party. With everyone laughing, the big guy tore a chunk of flesh out of Sawyer's hip and then kicked him out of the party. Several of the partygoers, including the girl who



had chatted him up, chased him down the street. He thought they might chase him forever but they broke off laughing after a few blocks.

To make matters worse, he threw up the food he ate. Other than a bit of warmth, Sawyer ended up getting nothing out of the party except a wounded hip, a sore rear end, and the taste of bile in his mouth. As he walked down the street away from the party, he felt the worst he ever had in his life. He wouldn't feel worse until he was walking away after losing the Grey Man in the hills with the Coyotes.

As he walked with his head down, feeling sorry for himself, the Grey Man appeared and startled him out of his musings. Now Sawyer knew this was the worst of the two days. The big man at the party all those years ago had only wanted to humiliate him. Sawyer was fairly certain the Grey Man wanted him dead and there was nobody around to stop him from trying.

## 34 – San Rafael

The Grey Man was out of breath, but he had a wide grin on his face. He laughed and began to circle Sawyer who crouched at the ready. The Grey Man laughed some more.

He lectured Sawyer on the importance of caution and preparation. He taunted him about losing his temper. He showed Sawyer the knives he carried and waved them menacingly. Sawyer felt the bottom drop out of his stomach. Normally this kind of situation pushed him into the red zone, and the irrational out-of-control Sawyer ended the situation. Now, when Sawyer needed his temper most, it was nowhere to be found. Rather than resisting the red zone he found himself trying to provoke it. All he could manage was sadness.

The Grey Man seemed to know this and mocked Sawyer in a way that increased the tears. The Grey Man circled closer and took a mock sympathetic tone. Sawyer thought this, for sure, would stoke his anger but he only felt pity for himself and for the Grey Man. Then he saw the weakness in the Grey Man's approach. He knew how to disable him. He needed a distraction and his confidence before the Grey Man decided to pounce.

And pounce he did, several times. They were merely feints every time, but frightening all the same and effective in keeping Sawyer off his game. The Grey Man was crouching to make another leap—one Sawyer thought would likely be his last. He found himself eerily of two minds. He saw exactly how to disarm and bring down the Grey Man if he had a partner. But the fact that he didn't have a partner sapped away the last of his resolve and left him depressingly open to the slightest attack. He gave up.

That's when Jango told the Grey Man to turn around slowly. The Grey Man faltered. Sawyer saw the opening but was too slow, sad and startled to take advantage. Still, Jango had arrived. The Grey Man recovered quickly and circled behind Sawyer.

Jango stayed where she was and told the Grey Man to give up. Jango said the Coyotes had surrounded the area. Running would mean death. Sawyer was fairly certain that was a bluff.

The Grey Man thought it was a bluff too and told Jango so. Jango invited him to try it out for himself and Sawyer noticed the Grey Man almost turned and ran. Instead, a dark gleam came into his eye and he stopped. Then he marched around Sawyer as if he was nothing but a

dead tree stump and went nose to nose with Jango who began to snarl. Sawyer didn't like this.

The Grey Man began to berate Jango the way he had berated the Coyotes, calling her every name in the book and throwing on piles of insults. Jango looked like she was about to grab the Grey Man and throw him to the ground. Then the Grey Man struck for Jango's heart.

The Grey Man talked about how he had gone back and killed all of "them" but Jango. He described the two partners Jango had trained with on the night she had searched for the leader of the Oakland cult. The Grey Man described that night and joked about Jango's stunned face when she found what she was looking for hiding in the water. He laughed at how easy it was to get past the young trainee and away into the fields.

It was him. It was the Grey Man.

Jango interrupted him with a shout. The Grey Man tried to keep talking but she talked louder and talked over him. She talked about a great leader who was supposed to unite all the various gangs and extremists of all kinds together but instead ended up running through a field to hide, his little empire fallen. She explained one inexperienced trainee had made the Grey Man's little house of cards blow away in the wind by smelling him out in the dark.

The Grey Man knew this game too well and didn't seem to notice what Jango was saying. Instead he launched a direct attack on Jango's character. He told her how easy it had been to spy on her. How incompetent she and her little skinny friend had looked chasing him around the pond. He laughed as he told her he hired The Bandit to cause trouble and make her neighborhood uneasy. It was a message. The Bandit was suspected of getting back at people who wronged him. That was the Grey Man's real plan. He would now get back at Jango for all he lost. He was already making her pay. Her partner was bleeding as it was.

This caught Jango by surprise and she looked at Sawyer. He had almost forgotten his wound. He looked down at the dark, wet spot where the Grey Man had got him. It pulsed with dull pain but it didn't seem that bad. He nodded firmly at Jango who gave the slightest nod back. It was on.

Jango interrupted the Grey Man's monologue, telling him how pathetic it was that someone who was utterly defeated by an inexperienced trainee could only begin to wreak revenge when that same agent was retired and old, and even then couldn't get it right. How amazing it was that he had stumbled into some kind of lucky leadership

all those years ago in Oakland when he couldn't even keep a fat man and a young lady under his control these days. How easy it was to take him down made her sad.

The Grey Man blew his top. He may have been good at this game but something Jango had said finally touched the nerve she had been looking for. That's when Sawyer pounced. He had crept up slowly from behind while Jango was talking. He saw the opening again, and this time he had a partner. He leaped and caught the Grey Man around the neck. This was it. The Grey Man yelped and struggled but Sawyer had him. Jango had been right—it was almost too easy.

Then the Grey Man stabbed him again. He didn't just stab him, but got him right in the sore spot where he had stabbed him before. Sawyer screamed in pain and let go of the Grey Man who bolted off. Jango chased after, but with her bad knee she couldn't catch him alone. Sawyer recovered and went into his flanking maneuver. He too wasn't at full speed with his injuries, but he and Jango worked well together. They kept the Grey Man from running off into the fields this time. Jango was pushing him toward a little stretch of bushes. Sawyer had cut off his escape routes from the other direction. He thought they had him again when the Grey Man dove into the bushes.

Jango raced around the other side of the clump of shrubbery. Sawyer pulled up to stand rear guard, but the Grey Man didn't come out. Sawyer and Jango began to circle around, but they left just enough gap and the Grey Man dove back out the way he came in. The chase was on again. They were trying their flanking maneuver but the Grey Man was running inspired. He knew they couldn't pour on full speed. He shouted back taunts, meaning he was comfortable enough to use up breath. He looked back laughing when Jango and Sawyer slowed down, spread out a measured distance between each other and stopped.

The Grey Man laughed at their stupidity, turned his head back around and almost ran right into the leader of the Coyotes. The Grey Man began to fluster and sputter, insisting that Jango had been bluffing.

The leader pointed out that he didn't look or feel much like a bluff. Sawyer and Jango moved in. He had nowhere left to turn. He showed his knives and began thrashing.

Jango told him it was over. He needed to let it go. Terrorizing Terra Linda had been, at best, annoying. Nobody had really complained to Jango about him. He wasn't even an official case, just a person of interest. If he gave up now, he wouldn't go to jail. He would just need to leave the neighborhood.

Without being asked, the Coyote leader said he would make sure the Grey Man stayed out.

So there you had it, Jango pointed out. He could go rebuild his imaginary armies of revenge somewhere else. Jango had bested him again and again would let him go, this time on purpose.

They Grey Man shrieked invective spitting and yelling and screaming. Sawyer told him to shut up. He was in no danger of the red zone but it was good to feel his strength returning after the chase.

That focused the Grey Man's anger. He walked up to Sawyer and began to tell him how worthless he was, how he would stab him again if he liked. How he never felt threatened when Sawyer was around.

Sawyer just laughed and told him to stop talking like an idiot. The Grey Man lunged at him but Sawyer lunged back with a furious snarl, causing the Grey Man to trip backward, fall down, scramble to his feet and take off running in the opposite direction.

This brought him running between Jango and the leader. Jango moved in and ordered him to stop. The leader reached out for him as well, but the Grey Man slipped through. His fast, awkward movements took them by surprise. He was giggling with glee when one of the Coyotes came out from hiding and grabbed the Grey Man by the neck and threw him to the ground.

Jango yelled no but it was too late.

The Coyote leader told Jango he was sorry, but it was what he ordered his people to do and it was exactly what the Grey Man deserved.

It wasn't their decision to make according to Jango.

The Coyote said they lived by different rules.

Jango said nothing. She looked down at the Grey Man, unmoving, lying on the ground.

## 35 – Abkhazia

Jango had felt this way about an adversary before in Georgia, the former Soviet Republic. She had been sent to Abkhazia to gather general intelligence. The Russians and the Georgians were in conflict and the Agency wanted to know who was up to what. Her contact was a young Georgian whose name she never learned. She made the meeting, obtained the info and was about to leave when he turned on her.

Both sides had paid him, he explained. He delivered the information as promised but he had made no guarantees she would leave their meeting alive.

She tried to reason with him.

She couldn't understand, he yelled. If he let her go, they would kill him. If he hadn't agreed to kill her, they would have killed him already. He had no choice if he wanted to live, and he very much wanted to live.

She pointed out that if he killed her, the Agency would pay him nothing. He laughed. She obviously didn't know her own Agency very well. He would deny any knowledge of her death and say he last saw her alive. There would be no opportunity for a further investigation and the other men he worked for would claim responsibility. That would be that.

Jango tried another tactic and pointed out that the men likely wouldn't let him live, even if he did kill her. They probably didn't trust him since he worked for both sides and would rather dispose of him than risk it.

This broke the man. He teared up. He didn't have a choice, he screamed.

Jango offered a new alternative. Come with her. She would get him out of the country and he would be free of the men and their influence. She could get him a new name and new life in exchange for helping her. She'd done it before.

He wrung his hands and actively resisted the idea at first, but in the end he agreed.

She had successfully gotten him out of Georgia and was moving into their first safe house in Russia when something terrible happened.

Unknown to Jango, the Agency had bugged the informant's location in Abkhazia. They knew he had made a deal to double-cross Jango. The Russians in the Agency's employ already hated the informant

for being Georgian, so as soon as he was inside the safe house, they put him in handcuffs and beat him cruelly.

One of the Agency's men used his weapon as a club. The gun went off. The informant died from the gunshot wound immediately.

Jango looked at the Grey Man the way he looked at the informant back then. She had hoped to give the Grey Man a chance to change his heart but she would never get that chance.

Sawyer came up from behind and nudged Jango. She looked in his eyes and saw the deep, sad pain. Sawyer was hurt of course, but that wasn't the pain she saw. He too had experienced a wound like this in his life. He too was sad for the death of an enemy.

## 35 – Merced

For Sawyer, it happened on his hard days in Merced. A brute called Blondie picked on Sawyer whenever they saw each other. Blondie had it out for Sawyer simply because Sawyer was new. Even after Sawyer wasn't new, Blondie kept it up out of habit. Sawyer also never gave in to Blondie, which meant Blondie never let up.

If Sawyer scrounged some food and Blondie saw, Sawyer would run. Sometimes he would get away and sometimes Blondie would catch him and take the food. It was a constant battle and a constant danger in Sawyer's already constantly dangerous life. Another danger was the police. One day while running from the police, Sawyer had the brilliant idea of getting the police to chase Blondie.

He knew where Blondie hung out and made sure the police followed him that way. As Sawyer came running up, he saw Blondie had piles of stolen goods around him. Perfect. He ran up and just as Blondie was getting ready to pounce on him, Sawyer yelled: Stop! Police! Blondie scattered. Sawyer made sure he stayed on Blondie's tail. The cops kept after Sawyer who stayed with Blondie to make sure Blondie thought the police were after him.

At first Blondie made snide cracks to Sawyer about being a shill and a fink for turning him in to the cops, but soon it became clear the police were after Sawyer. That meant they had a common enemy. An enemy they couldn't beat as easily alone. Blondie stopped cursing Sawyer and settled into an uneasy mode of cooperation. As they ran, they began to point out alleyways and fences and other obstacles and means of escape to each other. The cops were falling farther and farther behind, and Blondie saw a shack in the distance and pointed toward it. Sawyer suggested they cut down an alleyway away from it, climb the fence, run back quietly along the rooftops, drop down into the yard and hide in the shack. Even if the cops followed them, they wouldn't be able to stay close enough to see them go in the shack and would likely blow right past. Blondie agreed and they helped each other execute the plan perfectly.

They lost the cops and hid inside the shack. Neither of them looked very closely at it when they ran inside, but it seemed to be someone's rundown home. That probably meant trouble, so they waited to make sure the cops weren't coming before they left.



Blondie turned to Sawyer and, for the first and only time, said something that wasn't an insult. It was a simple thanks. Sawyer felt awful since he had led Blondie into the chase, but he accepted the thanks anyway in payment for all the other trouble Blondie caused.

Blondie gave him a sneer as if to say, don't get used to it, and then he walked out the shack's open front door. Sawyer was about to follow when he heard a single shot. He stopped short and peered around the corner of the doorframe.

An old man in dirty clothes had shot Blondie and was yelling something about trespassing and generally acting crazy. Sawyer knew he could get out the back door without being seen but was frozen in that instant. A horrible danger in his life was gone. He could have been ecstatic. But he had seen a glimmer of hope right at the end and now redemption was impossible for Blondie.

## 36 – San Rafael

Sawyer looked down at the Grey Man with same regret he had felt for Blondie. They would never know if the Grey Man could be redeemed. Jango and Sawyer looked in each other's eyes. They didn't do this for the money and the action. They both had a higher purpose. Jango may seem selfish, gruff and even rude sometimes, but it was only because she was impatient for the right things to happen in the world. Sawyer may seem impulsive, goofy and careless, but only because he was looking for a better world and hoping to make it happen through sheer force of will.

They nodded at this unspoken bond and turned to the leader of the Coyotes. Jango spoke for them. She said that this may or may not have been an accident. It may or may not have been what they wanted to happen, at least at some point. But this was not the way it should have gone down. And for that, the Coyotes must leave Terra Linda and leave for good. There were no police here. No law. This was the decision of Jango and Sawyer. The Coyotes could leave on good terms, but they had to leave now.

The leader pointed out that if it meant war, the Coyotes could win it right now. They had the numbers. But it wasn't what he wanted.

Sawyer spoke then. Jango looked nervous but didn't try to stop him. Sawyer told the Coyotes that it was a choice for their future as well. If they eliminated Jango and himself, there would be investigations. There would be attention. The war wouldn't come from Jango and Sawyer. No. It would come from the neighborhood. Jango and Sawyer were known. They had friends like Eileen and Tom who would avenge their deaths. It would cause trouble.

Sawyer knew this wasn't what the Coyote leader wanted. It wasn't what anyone wanted. He knew enough of the streets to know that. The Coyotes didn't respond to orders or threats. Sawyer said he had one fact to state and one request to make. The fact was that the Coyotes had made allies here. That would spread. They would no longer be seen as a pack of wild animals out for destruction. They could be seen as a force for good. Whether they desired that or not, it was a fact.

Then Sawyer made his request. He asked politely that the Coyotes consider their work done and take their leave, acknowledging this was the neighborhood of Jango and Sawyer. Think of Jango and

Sawyer as an allied gang if they wanted. But he asked, politely, that they go.

The leader shuffled his feet and looked at Jango. He told Jango that she had finally done a good job training this one, and he pointed his chin toward Sawyer. Then he spoke up loudly to his gang, saying the Coyotes' work was done, and their cooperation with the Sawyer gang had proved they were allies. They would leave the Sawyer gang's territory now, but if they were ever needed—and here he paused and looked hard at Sawyer—all they had to do was ask.

Jango thanked them again and Sawyer nodded. The Coyotes swept off as a whole, whooping and shouting as they ran.

Jango asked Sawyer what he thought of the name "The Sawyer Gang."

Sawyer admitted it did have a ring to it. The Coyote leader certainly couldn't make an alliance with Jango Champelli, private detective. He would have liked to pick the name, however. Maybe the Racer Fives, or the Fast Furiosity.

Jango just humphed and worried out loud that this would all give Sawyer a big head.

And with that, they headed home.

## 37 – San Rafael

The next few days were mundane. Sawyer went back to work, getting into the rhythms of being a project manager, chasing his tail in the usual bureaucratic way. He embraced the regularity of it. It was solid, mostly unchanging and grounding. But he knew a part of him would never be the same after what he saw in the hills of Terra Linda. Others noticed it too. He had been the office clown, constantly cracking wise and running around getting himself and others into trouble. He still had his usual energy, but there was something more sedate about him now.

Jango dived into her paperwork with gusto. She embraced mind-numbingly boring tasks with relish. She even cleaned. And in the meantime, a few jobs came through. Little things, like finding out where a spouse was going late at night or what kind of trouble the kids were getting into. Things she could handle with a minimum amount of effort and pretty much no danger.

She spent a lot of time in the parking lot by Scotty's Market just sitting, snacking and thinking. She hadn't felt this pensive since she quit the Agency. It wasn't that she didn't know what to do now that the Grey Man was gone. It was that she knew exactly what to do. Everything was laid out. There was nothing unexpected. That wasn't a bad thing—far from it. Jango liked it.

She also didn't trust it. Her brain and body had been trained to prepare for the worst at all times and now nothing was coming. She didn't know how to stand down.

Of course they made sure Fea was doing well. After Jango freed her, Fea got medical attention, with Eileen and Tom's help. Jango didn't say much, just made sure they knew about the injuries. They were smart enough to figure it out from there and got her to help quickly.

Fea, for her part, was eternally thankful. She was going to move to San Francisco and start over again but she promised to keep in touch. She had worried about giving evidence against the Grey Man but that wasn't an issue anymore. She was free to do whatever she wanted.

About a week after the events in the hills, Jango got a call. Something or someone was causing havoc in the park outside the Terra Linda rec center. It was the kind of thing that usually ended up being teens drinking late at night and maybe tagging a few fences. But one

thing the caller mentioned peaked Jango's interest and made her decide she needed Sawyer. Witnesses described seeing someone or something with grey hair.

It couldn't be. But some small part of Jango almost hoped. He made sure Sawyer could get off work early and arranged to look over the evidence at the park that afternoon.

Sawyer was thrilled. As much as he reveled in the routine of his job, the chance to get another case going, especially one as intriguing as this, got his juices flowing in a way few other things could. He knew it couldn't really be what they thought, but it was worth looking into all the same.

That evening felt like a flashback. It wasn't as high stakes as their stakeout of the Trash Man, but somehow it was better. The pursuit of the Grey Man included the horrible truths about him. This didn't have that. They both assumed it would end up being teens, yet they got a cheap thrill over the mystery of it.

Jango methodically sifted through trash and checked the ground for tracks. She found little consistent with teens. No cigarettes or empty bottles. She did find a few tracks, but nothing solid. Sawyer took a more haphazard, creative look at the evidence. Something caused Sawyer to want to climb one of the trees. He wasn't much of a tree climber, but he got far enough up to see in some branches. What he found was a tuft of grey hair they were familiar with.

After that discovery, Jango found other traces of it in other parts of the park: in the trashcan, at the picnic table and in random other places. Sawyer and Jango stared at each other. It was unthinkable. But the havoc had been happening every night for the past week *since* the events in the hills. Could it be? There was only one way to tell. They decided to hold a real stakeout after all.

They headed back to the office to get supplies and snacks and found themselves back at the rec center park. Unlike the previous stakeout, houses surrounded this park with gardens on most sides and the rec center building and pool on the rest. They didn't have deep woods to hide in, so they would have to make do in the recesses of a hedge near the rec center building. Not the best stakeout location and certainly not as comfortable as the one in the other park, but both of them were extremely motivated to solve this mystery as soon as possible.

They repeated their long wait, eating snacks, trying to stay awake and telling each other familiar stories. They knew most of each other's stories by then. Jango poked fun at Sawyer for always having a tale that involved starving in Merced and being chased by someone whom Sawyer had to outsmart to get away. Sawyer replied that all Jango's stories were about something getting royally messed up on a mission and Jango having to come up with some save-the-day plan on the spot. If she was such a good agent, why did her missions always get so messed up?

She pretended annoyance at this and they had a good-natured fake fight. At least it was fake to them. Anyone overhearing would have thought they were going for each other's throats. But it was their long familiarity that allowed them to cross into areas that would have been deadly to approach by anyone else.

Then Jango got serious and thanked Sawyer. She knew she wasn't the most loving of friends, but she hoped he knew she appreciated him. She hadn't meant for him to stay when she first took him in but she was glad he had. Sawyer proved to her that life wasn't so serious. He taught her new ways of looking at things. Even if it seemed like she always wanted him to play by her rules, she loved that he always pushed back and came up with his own. It kept her life new and interesting, and she wasn't sure she would have lived this long without his spirit to keep her going.

Sawyer told her to stop. She was perfectly healthy except for a little knee trouble, he said.

But Jango insisted. At her age the will to live was much more important than actual physical health. She found herself wanting to enjoy life more each day because of him. He inspired her and she thanked him.

In turn Sawyer told Jango that she genuinely made him better. He had always been clever but skated by on his charm. Jango pushed him to be smarter, to think about things harder than he ever had before. By never succumbing to his charm, she made him use his brain in ways he had never thought possible. He had fought against his personal demons without success until he met her. He fully believed his ability to stay in control was a direct result of her push to make him stop and think about life. His ability to learn and grow was thanks to her.

Jango tried to make Sawyer stop, said she was just being grouchy, but he kept on.

He added that she had truly saved his life when she took him into her Oakland home and for that he could never repay her. He wouldn't even try, except by always trying to be better than he had been the day before. He wouldn't always succeed, he knew. He was just too lazy sometimes, but he always tried, and he had Jango as his inspiration. He knew that in the long run he would get better over time. For that he thanked her.

They stared at each other with tears in their eyes. They were the best friends either one could ever hope for. Above every kind of relationship from lovers to family, friendship lasted. It had a choice to it that family didn't. That choice made it stronger because it didn't have to be. It was stronger than a lover's bond, because there was no ephemeral, brightly burning quality that would expire and leave them cold. Instead it was a strong undercurrent—a different kind of love, to be sure, but a strong, calm, long-lasting kind. Best of all, it was unspoken. Jango and Sawyer didn't have to make a sound. They didn't even have to look at each other to know where they fit in each other's lives. They just knew. Both of them sighed at the same time as they realized this and relaxed as they watched. Nothing, not even death, would truly separate them.

Their reverie was interrupted by a loud crash. Something was here. Jango harrumphed but Sawyer shushed her. They needed to sneak up on it, whatever it was. They began their well-practiced flanking routine. Sawyer left the hiding place first, wending his way out to the left of where the sounds came from, keeping a good distance and using picnic tables for cover. Jango swung around the other side and stayed in the darkness away from the street lamps that cast a small pool of light inside the park.

The noises continued as the unidentified thing threw trash and turned a barbecue grill upside down. A bird feeder was the next to suffer. Sawyer closed in. Jango picked up the beat without even seeing Sawyer and closed in as well. Neither of them could see their quarry. Knowing each other as well as they did, they didn't need to talk or even see each other. Instinct told them what the other was doing and what their next steps should be. Sawyer cut in sharply at the same time as Jango.

The noises began to trail off away from the rec center building toward a house that bordered the park. It faded to a small rustle. Sawyer widened out a bit, as did Jango. Someone watching from above would

have noticed their routes mirroring each other. They almost converged, briefly seeing each other's faces but the havoc-maker had already moved on so they blossomed out into a new approach pattern.

This time they would get him. They both knew it. Jango calculated the vector based on years of map training and pursuit dynamics. She laid out a mathematical formula in her head and used some trigonometry to prove it as a certainty, all in the blink of an eye. Sawyer felt it like a poem. He saw the narrative of their pursuit in his mind's eye and felt the conclusion fall into place like words falling along the meter of form. It felt certain.

What would they find? Their hearts beat faster as they closed in on a dark patch where they could confront whomever it was. Would it be for the first time? It wasn't teens. That much was for sure. Only one small figure fled in the night. Could it be the impossible? Jango and Sawyer ran toward each other now with the havoc-maker occupying a moving point of their intersection. They could barely make out the dim form in the dusk. It raced through darkness toward a pool of light spilling out from a house's back porch. In a few seconds it would reveal itself in the light. At that exact moment, Jango and Sawyer would catch it.

Images raced through Sawyer's mind. He saw Fea fearful. He saw the Fat Man deceitful. He saw the Grey Man taunting and berating him. He saw himself defeated. He saw Jango riding to the rescue. He saw the Grey Man lying motionless on the ground in the hills of Terra Linda. Had he been motionless? Had they made sure? Could it be?

The figure was one step from the light. Jango and Sawyer were one step from meeting it. Images flashed through Jango's mind. She saw Fea carried away by Eileen and Tom. She saw Sawyer about to fall. She saw the snarl of the leader of the Coyotes. She saw the leer of The Bandit. She saw the Grey Man lying inert in the hills of Terra Linda. Had he been motionless? She almost convinced herself that she remembered him twitching. Could it be?

All three met in a pool of dim, yellow light. They stopped the havoc-maker and spun him around to face them. They had him.

They began to laugh uproariously. Sawyer fell on his back with joy. Jango barked and howled with hilarity.

It was a squirrel.